

"Naleva," the warden's assistant said, and yawned. That accomplished, he wiped the spittle on the hem of his tabard, one more stain on the bleached colors of the Lockbox District. The insignia happened to be Morihaus rampant, with clipped wings reminding everyone that they sat in the wrong sort of prison. Holding areas on each fragment of Cyrodiil City's fused archipelago had their own forgiving, neighborly feel to them, but here everyone was a stranger. Imperial justice doesn't rouse itself for petty criminals, so its inmates are usually over towards the dire end of the scale. Lucky for me.

The guard had no idea who in the cell would answer him. He just waited with the foul air swirling about his head, not even bothering to look at the apprentice-killing burgher's wife, the goldenrod Numidiumist inciter or the hag who never really got over the Simulacrum. Nor at me, of course. Yes, I was there too. And damning my own chromatically-confused eyes with every breath.

"Naleva S?"

I jingled my manacles by way of response, and he approached to unlatch them from the petrified wood of the bench. Colovian fingers (pale but hairy, you know the kind) flipped up the tag on the prison bib I had been given a fortnight ago, exposing the expected initials.

"Paperwork for you, N. S."

There were rice grains caught between his tabard and belt. I wish I could say I didn't want to peck at them.

"My favorite, boss."

We left the cell. The drafty air in the hall was so novel that I forgot to keep pace, and was dragged along by the wrists as the wonderfully mobile atmosphere chilled and refreshed all at once.

"Sit."

Now we're in that side office sort of room at the end of the passage. I've been handed over to a clerk from up topsides somewhere. He has a file. Why the hell am I in a file?

They sit me down. The clerk opposite looks nonplussed.

"Your full name?"

"You already have it."

"What does the S stand for?"

"Well..."

"Tell me your family name, prisoner, unless you enjoy being underground."

I sigh.

"S stands for Serendipity. And it's not my family name."

"Seren... An alias? Street moniker, perhaps?"

I swear the bastard was smirking.

"Not even. Just something I was called once or twice. Look, the watch *really* wanted to hear a surname, and the name's just Naleva. Nothing before or after that. Orphanage mark, see?"

I laid the back of my hand on the table to reveal the tattoo of a gypsy moth and a goshawk.

"Ah, born into one of Pelagius' foundling outfits, were you?"

"Up in Cheydinhal, yes."

There's a hint of pride in my voice despite myself. Back in the days when the population of street children was considered a problem, rather than part of the scenery, the throne set up endowments for vocational orphanages. Most were religious, grooming gutter trash for life as lay clergy, but a few focused on military training or taught a trade. Some institutions acted like orphan entrepôts, sorting their charges based on potential aptitude (usually determined by race) and sending them off to the relevant affiliate organizations. Being of no clear race or creed myself, I fell in with a different sort. The head of my adopted family ran things in a rather unorthodox fashion, but taking in a million drakes from export speculation allows a certain degree of independence. He funded half of the clan himself, driven to it by some sort of intense faith in Zenithar that he kept to himself, probably because it was heretical.

Unlike other groups, we were often on the move. Galenus taught us to defend ourselves while we lived off the land through a combined effort of foraging, hunting and peddling. I still can't fathom why a man who had gotten rich off the abstractions and excesses of civilization decided on autarky for us. Whatever his reasons, my eccentric patron took on the smartest of us as business proteges, and a few of us as concubines. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we were strangers to society and experienced a general failure to make anything else of ourselves individually. So the clan went on even after the first generation grew up. There were a few tight-knit orphanages like that, and some even considered applying for guild charters. What we would have been a guild of, I don't know. But that was my childhood, and my life afterwards, as I saw to Galenus in his old age with a dwindling number of hangers-on. I left him in his room with the curtains drawn, all the servants dismissed and assets liquidated, rice mush dribbling down his chin. When I was arrested, that is.

"So you definitely were orphaned, then," the clerk said, almost to himself. I glanced at him incredulously.

"Do you know your parents' names?"

"No."

"And can you confirm the day of birth present in our records?"

He slid a sheaf of paper over the table towards me, jealously covering everything but the pertinent date.

"Yeah, that looks about right. When will I be told why I'm being held?"

More papers appeared from the brief, and my host adopted an even more disinterested tone for the purpose of reading.

"Naleva S... Nibennium Menor, Imperial City. No listed occupation. No family. No charter affiliations. Potential magical aptitude but no recorded assessment or training... Detained in mass arrests in connection with major tribal/racial incident. Held on suspicion of participation in violent riots at the Skiffs Market, Paravant Ward, triggered by Trans-Niben conflict rumors."

"Wrong place at the wrong time, really."

"Subject was not vouched for by any local millet chiefs..."

This wasn't the first time that being a half-caste had proved less than empowering. My mother was Dunmer and my father was human, from somewhere or other. From her I get a rather gravelly voice (the most pronounced of several conspicuously masculine features), plus skin that is sallow at dawn and gray at dusk. Also there are the eyes, which are laced with red like a bit of dye poured into stew and not properly stirred. On the whole they are dark and tend to suck in the light, which makes me think there may be some wood elf in the cocktail. And because none of the different ethnic magistrates in my neighborhood would call me their own, I couldn't be treated according to any of their respective legal regimes and...

"...was accordingly incarcerated in Imperial facilities. Held for six days on suspicion of belonging to anti-beastfolk militia—"

"Like hell! As if I give a damn who owns that malarial swamp down south or who walks where with what kind of claws."

"...and released on the first of Last Seed when no charges could be filed."

"Last Seed! That was a week ago! What by Mara's Tit's have I—"

"That was your final interruption, prisoner." He straightened a handful of papers by way of emphasis, making a slapping sound on the table as he jostled them. I realized for the first time that the leather folder they came from bore a seal drawn in wax. It was a scrying sigil, which meant that someone else was watching remotely. What they were getting out of this excuse for an interrogation was beyond me.

"A clerical error was indeed made. You were scheduled for release, but higher authorities intervened in your case."

Always nice when the Empire is looking out for you.

"It was determined that you should be repatriated as soon as suitable transport could be arranged."

"*Re*-patriated?"

"To Morrowind, yes."

"Why am I being *patriated*?"

"Your file doesn't say. However, you are entitled to know that you will travel at our expense before being discharged from Imperial custody on the island of Vvardenfell. Bear in mind that your residence status shall remain unchanged, so your freedom of movement in Vvardenfell District may be contingent upon your conduct and responsiveness to Imperial strictures."

What. Maybe time to pull out the stops.

"But I—How can—exile! Why?"

I plunged my fingers into my hair in what would be a passably melodramatic gestures if not for all the knots and the lice skittering across my scalp.

"What about my possessions? Will you notify—"

He cleared his throat with annoyance, but the nervous timbre told me he wasn't used to dealing with pleading convicts. More rustling papers.

"Ah, here we are. We have ascertained that all your personal effects can be considered the property of one Galenus Calabrat. Legally, we are not obliged to pass information on to any third party, given the *informal* nature of all your acquaintances. Not that the law is such a great encumbrance in this case at any rate..." Was that a disapproving note in his voice? "You may be interested to hear that neither you nor any other former members of your orphanage is a beneficiary of your former guardian's inheritance."

I already knew that, never expected anything different. Still stings.

"Will I be imprisoned once I get to Vvardenfell?" I ventured in a small voice. Less acting this time. The depth of the information he had suddenly retrieved was probing my spine with frigid fingers. Some one cared far too much about me.

"Well, perhaps we might just..." That could have been a flash of sympathy. This fellow certainly did not belong down here in the sordid dark, and they hadn't clerked and accounted the humanity out of him yet.

"Or the mines? I'd take a cell over the mines."

My interrogator reached deep into the brief and retrieved an elliptical piece of silk.

"This may allay your concern... oh—" He hissed away an uncouth word. "...more of their hypnogogic flimflam!"

I couldn't make out any recognizable alphabet on the oddly-shaped missive as he flapped it about.

"Translation, please!" The prison obligingly interpreted his bellow as a series of tinny echoes. There was silence for a few moments, then light, scuffing footsteps in the corridor. The folder containing my file tipped over, burying the surveilling mark in the tabletop as the door inched open.

"Thank you for your assistance, Melior," said the clerk.

No such Melior yet emerged, however. He was preceded by the flickery shape of a moth. It seemed to disappear between wingbeats in the dim light, blinking between points in the room from moment to moment. Then all at once it alighted on my wrist, not too far from the tattoo it so resembled, its spread wings exactly the color of my skin.

I'm looking at my little guest, and then in walks a real character. Anyone who can rightfully call themselves a CiCi has come across them during festival days. The devotees to this or that ancestor/animal cult, looking like they stepped out of five hundred years ago for an evening stroll, the bits of Cyrodiil that are too Nibenean for common decency, embarrassing us supposedly modern Imperials in front of whatever Altmeri or Nordic types that happen to be passing by. This guy has the beaded shawl, the robes, the red accouterments, the facial tattoos all over the bald head, the works.

Only he's a bit more prestigious than the rest, a moth priest. His winged pet is gone when I look back down to wonder what I have gotten myself into.

My clerk holds up the silk, and Melior gives it a cursory examination. I swear it's not letters on that thing. The monk whispers a few sentences into cupped hands, bows, carefully restores the folder to its upright position with the scrying emblem pointed squarely at me, and leaves.

"Good news for you, Naleva S. You shall be a free woman, to some extent. I know this is highly irregular, but go along with it and you will be compensated and provided for on arrival. There is still a semblance of judicial procedure left in your case, so I will just assure you that you have not been sentenced and will not be." Nimble clerical hands recomposed the folder, all original contents restored to their proper order and orientation. "And really," he attempted an encouraging smile, "in your situation, a new start in the fatherland can't be so bad, can it?"

I look at him blankly. I'm not going home.

The first leg of the journey was the worst. They took me down to Rummy without further explanation and we boarded a gondola. I was manacled to the gunwale, facing forward with my hand dangling outboard. We pulled a ways out from Polefel and lake eels started streaming around under the keel. They cut circles in the water beneath my fingers, a hairsbreadth from the surface, hoping for a quick peck of half-breed.

It takes us ten minutes to get clear of City Isle's halo of waterborne filth, out to the divide where the radial current cools the lake and diverts the polluted cloud southwards. The air smells different immediately, and it hits me that I'm leaving. I jerk backwards, iron cutting at my right wrist. The boat sways, the guards frown, and the eels disintegrate into purple Rumare. Still can't see over my shoulder. The city I haven't left in years is a light-colored haze in my peripheral vision. I can hope that we yaw to the left at some point, or I can just picture it.

There're those pearly towers I never looked up at it, whose foundations I never chanced upon, and the big one in the middle. The city beneath, distant cousin to some species of white tropical moss, riding heavily on too-few islands, the gaps between them sewn shut by the cobwebs of a hundred bridges. It lets out smoke all the time, because it's always someone's feast day or hour of offering, if not just an outlandishly scheduled meal. The pall spreads out over the water, and so does the city, always sinking pilings in more and more of the lake, every month another Polefel built on stilts. The voracity for space and material overpowers all the intentions of the lake, creating unnatural currents that draw in vast clots of floating timber. The rafts of tomorrow's houses have their own shepherds, Argonians that stand rigid and motionless on the logs. They look for all the world like just one more floating tree.

The stone city sits aloof from all that, built on bedrock shot through with two thousand years of Welkynd moonlight. That's the city that they call Imperial, as opposed to Cyrodiil's city. Us CiCi's belong to a place that is less occupied with absorbing the wealth of Tamriel and the magicka of the cosmos than in trading pestilence with the waters of the Niben. Even while Galenus' wealth lasted, we lived in the apartments above his commercial headquarters on the waterfront. With a benefactor worth three millions, I still lived on the fill, not the bedrock.

So snap out of it, Naleva, and realize that even if this boat gets caught up in the current and swirls around like a Falinesti horn top, you'll see only the most unrealistically flattering view of home. You don't live anywhere near those towers. The people that do are swirling powdered tiger claw into their century-old Skingrad, reading your file and signing lives away into exile. And remember, you might have left the city soon anyways, had they not charged you with the sacred duty of returning as soon as possible, just to spite them.

But I said this leg of the journey was the worst. That's because the minders knew that I was still on home turf and were paranoid about escape. I swear the manacles got tighter every mile, and so did

the feeling of being uprooted. The road to central Morrowind, of course, goes straight past Cheydinhal. It climbs up away from the humid lakeshore and rice plantations, along the ridge that overlooks the Nibenay Basin's mangroves and swollen rivers. From there, it's a steep ascent and sharp hook through the gap they renamed Septim's Gate Pass. It's a victorious name, meant to wash away the memory of all the blood it cost Reman the Last to batter his way through.

These were not fortuitous circumstances for revisiting the highlands where I was born. To be perfectly honest with my gentle readers, getting a last glimpse of all those places I imagined I remembered convinced me of the tragic nature of my situation. I wasn't right in the head. I may have been weepy.

Rest assured that subsequent years have provided perspective. Those wooded hills I mourned over then are nothing more than the campgrounds where an eccentric millionaire practiced his bizarre ideas of public service with a gaggle of roving orphans, deflowering an awkward half-Dunmer along the way. As for the city, the prominence of garbage in my description should speak volumes. Cyrodiil was a lifetime ago.

I wanted to do this straight. I'm not sure how well that's going.

A friend of mine, with whom I have a complicated relationship that stretches back a millennium or so, once taught me a lot about truth, and how it's often not quite the thing. He's right, but it doesn't sit that well with me. So I'll take an alternate inspiration from the fellow, because the main thing about him is that he's more divided in half than I'll ever be. He's living (last I saw) proof that you can have it both ways.

You should have some sort of an idea how things work around here by now. I'll try to write half the time like a good memoir, one for the chroniclers, to please a female friend of mine (with whom I have an equally-complicated relationship). But now I really have to shrug her off and write like Naleva. This is her now, in case you were wondering.

So. Seyda Neen. So difficult to get this one right.

You look like shit. That's because
they have taken you from the Imperial City's prison,
first by carriage, from which you didn't bother to escape
and now by boat. To the east,
to Morrowind if you weren't paying attention.
Fear not, piss yourself no longer, ***for I am watchful,***
you have been chosen by a bald freak with bugs for a beard

The ship wakes me.

The hawser scrapes along swollen planks, a fingerswidth away on the opposite side of the hull. A final clunk as we are warped into port, and I'm still down in the dark underwater. Somehow I have been made aware of all this activity while asleep (dreaming, as the singular specimen across from me would have it). Half a lifetime on the waterfront leeches this awareness into your marrow like salt, and the smell never entirely fades.

Away with the cobwebs in the eyes and the jutting pains in my back. Everything I'm wearing is damp. Slimy and clinging, I feel my prison garments melding with the vessel's ancient, teeming bones.

Need to get up, wake up, and clear my thoughts, especially as we've—
“—reached Morrowind. I'm sure they'll let us go.”

Yes, that's what the fellow across from me said. Focus on him; it's worth the look. Milords and ladies, may I present to you a true grit-in-the-throat Velothi. He has the real Dunmer skin, deep slate and mottled. Nourished by the motherland's harshness, it has none of the sickly, bluish quality of the CiCi ashborn. But most of all it's the voice, that wasted rasp that puts the cruelty of those red eyes in their proper place. My own are dislocated, outraged and orphaned by the discordant snip-snip-slap of the Polefel dialect.

Full disclosure. I'm writing this, well, *now*, when what you know will happen has already happened. So some of who I am today (a foreign object, all told) may rub off on who I was at Seyda Neen. I've just called myself out, and will try to be more true to my thoughts as they were in those days. Rest assured, the above was *not* my reaction to that Dunmer, the second-to-last prisoner on the boat.

“Quiet. Here comes a guard.”

And so he does. My, but the Imperial kit is ragged out here. Cheap, ready and functional, but ragged. As only I am summoned, I rouse myself and trot forward out of the forepeak. Hammocks are being stowed on either side of us, by seamen scarcely less ratty than myself. What was the bit about sailors in the verse Galenus taught us? *Hands of horn and soles of silk*.

We haven't actually seen Vvardenfell yet. Although two nights ago, thrashing about hove-to in the squalls, we did see several hundred pounds of it airborne. A great part of the mountain's ash gets sucked up into Nirn's upper reaches, flowing overhead like a red river. Once it all gets over water, the stuff tends to sink down to sea level, and the crew spent four hours sweeping and scrubbing volcanic crystals from the decks. I've heard all about the ashlands, but the ship's Nord cook assured me that Red Mountain hasn't blanketed the entire island for many generations now. Some coastal areas are skipped over by the high altitude discharge, and I may even see green grass.

New air downfloods through the hatch, a strange consistency to it. It's not quite a scent, but a volume. It has body. Three drops of water fall from the brailed course above my head, some sort of native Dunmer rig. And then it's up and out and topsides.

Right, *now* the air has a scent. Seyda Neen smells green and damp. I hear friendly words of direction from a Redguard soldier off to the right, but am blinded by the sun that passes so strangely through this haze. Less friendly instructions now; I stumble down the gangway before my vision clears. On a dock, one of very few docks. Gods, have I ever seen a port this small? An incongruously Colovian structure with a thatched roof sits athwart the exit to the pier, and there is something immense with too many legs off to my right. As the legionary steers me towards the entrance, I realize that the surrounding swamp, with its creaky, moss-hung trees, isn't too different from the southern parts of Nibenay.

This next part is just paper work, standing (and stinking) before an impeccably-groomed old bureaucrat in the warmly furnished Census and Excise office. He was most insistent on verifying my birthsign. Fine, then. The Serpent, Dragon Descendent. And then some awkward questions about martial training (if any). He seemed strangely expectant, and I thought it wise to clam up. Finally, something to sign (of course), and mention of a release fee to prick my ears up.

They shuttle me through a few more rooms, which I probably left befouled with bilge scent. This is a real backwater outfit, nothing like the institutions of overawing Imperial bombast that a CiCi like me is used to. That said, being sat down on a stool across from a Legion officer in full armor has a certain sobering effect, no matter the rusticity of one's surroundings.

Only this one introduces himself. Sellus Gravius.

“Naleva S? Welcome to Vvardenfell. Let me see your identification papers and we shall try to sort all this out.”

He scrutinizes the certificate that the bureaucrat drew up in the other room. There's something

tentative in the way he shuffles papers around, and a certain familiarity in his manner.

"We were notified of your arrival on extremely short notice. Yesterday, in fact." He looks down at the papers and up at my clothes, consternation on his face. Could Crew Cut here think that I am something other than a prisoner?

"I assume the papers are in order?" So hard to adopt an imperious tone when your throat is dry.

"Yes, quite. Although there is a letter which preceded you and the language is..." He smiled faintly. "You know the Empire. Let not the left hand know what the right hand is doing."

What a positively Colovian expression. I crossed my arms by way of response.

"But rest assured, I recognize that your case has been expedited by the highest authority." He gestured at a stamped crest with something like reverence. "It appears I should simply convey what instructions have reached us."

"If you please."

From the desk appeared a small package wrapped in animal skin and twine.

"You are to deliver this coded communicate to one Caius Cosades, and report to him for further orders. Were you briefed on Cosades?"

"Regrettably not."

"Typical. He lives in the county seat, Balmora. Not the easiest man to track down, but apparently he trusts the guides at a local bar with his whereabouts. Ask for him at the South Wall Cornerclub. I don't know Balmora well, but the bar sounds like the working class district on the east side of the river. Is that all clear?"

"Yes," I lied. Forget explanations, the one hand clearly knew nothing of the other's doings, and it could mean freedom to me.

"Right, then. Best of luck carrying out your charge." He stood, armor creaking and rasping upright along with him. "The coinpurse there is also at your disposal. 'The Empire is Law...'"

"And the Law is sacred." I dully completed the valediction, trying not to pounce on the money. A final stiff nod and the torturous ouroboros of Imperial bureaucracy spat me out into the street a free mer, blinking in the strange breeze.

First of all, to stuff the coinpurse somewhere. Not everyone can hide heavy metal objects in their bosoms, so tuck in the shirt and cradle it around the waistband. I've neither a pocket nor a bag, and everything I'm wearing makes my skin crawl.

It wasn't necessary, but old habits die hard, and I tucked myself away in the nearest alcove to count the drakes. Half the people I saw on the way weren't Dunmer, or even in foreign dress. With mossy stone walls on either side of me, the place seemed even more Colovian. Sure, there was some sort of three legged toad with a dorsal fin surfing around in the puddle there, but...

Eightyish septims. It's probably more than has ever been handed to me all at once, much less from the Empire, but I'm a grown girl now. It will vanish in days. If I don't find some sort of nook for myself on this island, a sugared-up Khajiit will be ripping through my nethers by Tirdas, and paying the non-guild rate.

The transplanted western houses peter out pretty quick. There's a smaller bay littered with idle fishing craft, a precarious jumble of a lighthouse, and a short slope down to the real swamplands. Miserable-looking Dunmer shacks all over the place down there, the dark twigs in their walls seemingly held together by rot and rot alone. It's where I'll end up sleeping if something doesn't come my way.

I find the tradehouse by feel, perhaps drawn to it by the cliffcracers (gods know what I thought they were then) that circled around its soaring chimney. A wooden deck leads to the entrance, overlooking a more native-looking market and the slum by the bay. It's an Altmer at the tradehouse's main booth, and the thought of one of those Cyrodicized swindlers holding court here is oddly comforting. The place looks like an entrepot for desirable imports and choice Vvardenfell goods, possibly whatever Census and Excise is skimming off the top. Most of it's out of my price range and I

hear the sounds of a bar from upstairs. Turns out, what I want most in the world right now is to not be wearing these clothes and to scrub off a good three layers of this skin. Thank Zenni I cut most of my hair off last month. The second-floor tavern is morose, if fairly well attended for mid-morning. Approach the barkeep, who looks pretty and severe the way only Redguards can.

“Do you have a room for let?” She casts a jealous glance at the single door in the corner, not wanting to acknowledge me. Taking her grimace for affirmation, I retrieve a few coins (an awkward operation if ever there was one) and ask if there is a wash basin in the room.

“Not quite. We do things native fashion around here these days.”

“And that means... no water?” At least the gold gets me a response.

“Aye. What do you want the room for?”

“Tell me how to get to Balmora and I'll let you know.” Now I get a look that says 'you poor dear.' No less suspicion, though. I show her the size of the coinpurse and it doesn't go well with my garments.

“You must have swam here, girlie. Tell you what, my sujamma shipment comes in by strider in a few hours. Meet it at the port and maybe you will be first in line to tag along with Adosi. Shouldn't cost you much.”

“And might I rent the room until then?”

“Have it for eight, but only if you don't go near the bed. I'd go into debt to washerwomen.”

A skeletal Dunmer child appeared with the key, and I took a mug of shein with me. It turned out like ricewine with an aftertaste. There was a bucket on the floor of the room, which was all I really needed. I slung the handle across my wrist, handed back the key and set off for the market.

The circle of stalls wasn't large, but in retrospect, that made it worse. Here is where it all caught up to me, and I almost ran away. Knots in my throat, I paced up and down the row of vendors at least twice, willing none of them to recognize my indecision.

I thought you were from the city, damnit. What wide-eyed sheep-bumping rot is all this, then? Just get what you need.

I really did think I was better than this. I practically grew up in a market, teeming with stranger merchants than this, with everything unknown and treacherous mere sport for a gutterwise CiCi. But the city was a swirling hive of everything, where no one could lay claim to you or the ground you trod on. This was a *place*, and it had rules and senses and thoughts and goddamn guardian spirits that did not want me there at all. It turns out, there is nothing more terrible on this earth than having to buy new clothes at an alien marketplace. Petrified of eye contact with the vendors, you have mere seconds to assess each item. Who can tell you what choice will betray your ignorance, your helplessness? Will the breeches most like your Cyrodilic garb mark you down for the wrong religion, or the other gender?

Finally I chose a nondescript tunic and leggings, and felt the strange weave of the fabric as I tucked it under my arm. After that some imported half boots, kicking my old shoes into a pool of dense green algae. I wasn't able to haggle for any of it, and gods know what the markup for speaking Cyrodilic was. Lastly, not knowing what else to use for a washcloth, I bought a circular piece of copper-colored fabric. I now know that it was one piece of a prayer quilt, which explains the price and the acrid look I got for purchasing it. A harried-looking wood elf directed me to the village well, which tapped into a spring halfway up the outcropping that overlooked the docks.

On the way to draw water, I got a look at the strider port. You can imagine what bricks were shat, and this wasn't even one of the ashlands species that has more legs. No amount of stories about giant bug-crabs can actually get the concept fully into your mind ahead of time. I've also found that no length of time spent off the island will get their rumbling, soulful calls out of your ears.

Things get easier from here. I bring the bucket back to my room, slopping half of it onto the ground as I walk down the hill. Another costly expenditure for Nibenean soap (don't risk it with the native stuff), and I can finally strip, washing up after a fashion. The main thing is that I never have to touch my prison clothes again. For all I know those rags are still balled up underneath the bed in

Arilles' only room. Having found my appetite again, the barkeep didn't gouge me for a loaf of bread. The last purchase on the way to the strider port was a penknife. Blade was only as long as my little finger, but that's all it takes.

The further inland you go on the Bitter Coast, the more the air thickens. Nowadays, when swamp fever is no longer a concern for me, and I've developed an affinity for mud and insects (their absence signals something much worse on this island), the region has a sort of languid appeal. Took me two months to get used to just the atmosphere, though, so you can imagine how I was on day one.

Forty feet up in the strider, however (it is hard to recall the time when stepping inside a carapace was novel), our heads would break out into clearer air from time to time. There was never a moment when the trees—which I didn't know Vvardenfell had—did not loom above us, thrusting into the compartment with their sticky canopy leaves. I think it's those same trees that rarify the air so, because I would catch a whiff of crisp sea breeze only when our mount loped into the occasional open patch.

My mahout is Adosi Ahaz. Had I heard his name today, I would have been able to pick him out as a former ashlander. He took very few coins for the trip because no one ever lines up for Hla Oad, wherever that is. Oh right, so this means I am walking to Balmora, for all but the swampy portion of the trip. I'm told I can make it before midnight (in a highly doubtful tone), but only if I buy some of his scrib jerky.

Adosi is silent for long periods of time, until that flinty head of his arrives at some thought it deems important. For roughly half an hour he stood at the controls and carried out a covert interrogation with a few innocuous questions and glances. Left hand on a severed tendon and right index finger intertwined with the strider's nerve column, the matter of my heritage came up. Seeing me struggle with the question of whether I was 'Velothi,' Ahaz rephrased.

“Are you Dunmer?”

That really didn't get any closer to the problem. As a last resort, the mahout retrieved his guardian, the small vial of grave dust that everyone here carries around their neck. This invitation for an ancestor potluck evoked only a quizzical stare, and Adosi tucked the container back into his shirt with a stately nod. Question definitively answered.

For the benefit of other Westerners and milkskins (honorary or otherwise), I will sketch out this insect here. The cockpit is surprisingly spacious, a hollow compartment seemingly bitten into the strider's shell. Or rather, it's spacious when you are riding in style, and not perched atop several hundredweight in bulk goods. That day, I squatted on sacks of saltrice, and even the slow easy lurch of our progress made the edge of the cockpit wink at me menacingly. I could wedge myself into the aft quarter of the compartment, down below the heaps of supplies where an uneven bound did not threaten to roll me overboard. That meant, however, squeezing up against the interior wall of the shell, which glistened in a fleshy sort of way and gave off a powerful scent. Adosi would also glare at me whenever I stepped off the thick canvas 'rug' that protects the strider's sensitive dorsal areas from the dusty boots of passengers. So I grabbed the heaviest, most expensive object available and clung to it, satisfied that if the beast pitched me to my death, I would take something dear with me. I've ridden a lot of striders since then, and become accustomed to the more refined mounts with cushioned cockpits, tea and hackle-lo near at hand. At the moment, however, I watched the landscape undulate past on edge.

Speaking of landscape, it's starting to rise. The strider's movement changes entirely on an incline, as its legs undergo contorted movements that are difficult to discern from my vantage. Dear crabbie here can climb like a Valenwood ape, but you couldn't call him graceful when doing anything other than, well, striding.

“We have turned north, off the coast, Naleva.” He is clearly uncomfortable addressing me by just one name, as if he just looked up my skirt.

“Oh?”

“I will let you down soon, so listen closely. I take the route along the green strip by the water, and cross the Odai at its mouth to reach Hla Oad. This is out of your way, however. You should cut through the hills ahead of us, then find the bridge across the river. After that, it is a straight walk north to Balmora, with no wrong turnings. Thirty miles, maybe more.”

And there were hills ahead of us now, lumpy grey shapes emerging from the haze. The road beneath us ran right through a narrow gap, a definite entrance flanked by two enormous stone obelisks half again as tall as the strider. Something stirred in my gut when I saw them, and I don't think I'm making that up. Morrowind.

“Up there, eh?”

“Truly. There Foyada Mamaea piles up on itself, never reaching the sea. It's high enough that the mountain winds brush the top: the only ash waste in these parts.”

“Ash w—wait just a minute!”

“Milady, no need to worry. The plateau is mere miles across. You are not dressed for ashland, true, but in this daylight, simply keep an eye on the northern sky, and you will be able to cross in safety. It is worth your while to shorten the trip.”

I bite my lip and watch the twin pillars bob towards us. Adosi sees the leaf-wrapped package of scrib jerky cradled in my lap.

“Eat now, Naleva. Come nightfall, there is an egg mine on the river, and they are ever anxious to sell at market price.”

What do you suppose are the odds I will be able to stomach whatever that is?

“Now clap on to something. We descend.”

A complicated series of surgical interventions in the strider's nervous system and the cockpit loses all stability. Our mount calls out to the ashlands and its shell around me vibrates, strumming like a lute. The stone pillar rise higher above us as the strider pitches fore and aft in the manner of a falling leaf.

“Climb out and down the middle leg, milady.” The dark chitin tree trunks holding us up are splayed out to either side now, half folded up on themselves. If I fall, it's only fifteen feet or so. Hell with this, just imagine that it's a drainpipe or a rafter, and you're fifteen again. Looks a lot slipperier than a drainpipe, though, and with little thorn-like pimples sticking out.

“Many thanks, Adosi Ahaz. Any tips for me?”

“Simply walk straight on from the pillars until you see water, and avoid the hills and the racers.”

“How likely am I to actually make it?”

“Pay the vista no mind. You shall be quite safe. If you wake tomorrow with black crust in the corners of your eyes, see the healer to cure you of Blight. But that is not so likely this far south, even these days.”

“What confidence you instill. Fair travels, your bug and you.” Swinging out and sliding down the outstretched leg is easier than expected, although Cosades' package slips off my belt on the way.

“May ancestors find you,” Adosi calls. I have never since heard what I took for his customary farewell.

Coarse sand shifts under my feet, and I back away to wait for the strider to rise up again. Watching them move from down below is a different experience entirely, one I won't attempt to reduce to paper. The sound of their footfalls does not carry far, and in seconds I am alone with this island and its silence.

There is a definite threshold between the stone monoliths, which are twice the size down here. One step between their massive foundations and everything dies. Grey, grey, grey. A dozen and a half shades of it, with great boulders tinted in green and beggarly plants reflecting purple in their jealous, desiccated roots. One really has to see it to comprehend any of this, but the plants are easily-named,

and scarce enough. Trama, scathecraw, firefern, not much else. And illustrations of the island always feature those pillars that are everywhere. They even build replicas for the conquest anniversary parades. What's most striking are those skeletal trees, the reminders of this land's fickleness. There were greyer times here once, when the ash fell nightly on Vivec, and greener ones as well. At the moment, nothing grows on the ridges. Anything that sticks up into the path of Red Mountain's currents gets blasted, scoured and scraped clean until there's nothing but bare rock. The cliffcracers can stand it, hovering there in all weather, but nothing else does. When you get flatter places between hills, then you have ashland.

And that is where I walk, through a light, smoky breeze. The air is crisp now, it flows sharply across my tongue. Everything around me is hard and edged and clear, a world poised to wait out my brief window of ease and deliver harsh judgment upon this interloper. The cliffcracers hover in every direction above me, the crowd jeering a prisoner condemned to the arena. I don't associate them with the ashlands, however. They are a touch too ridiculous, naught but frivolous airborne rats in a place too severe for them.

Not so long now after passing between those toothy stone gates and the plateau widens. The bleak ridges diverge, letting the wastes open up before me. It's a long, slow descent from here, a gentle grade of dim shapes and unsteady footing. I'm walking beneath a mountain wind, so the sky a half mile above me has darkened with blowing smoke, shedding its grey light upon us. When your stinging eyes probe the shifting curtains of a Vvardenfell haze in the ashlands, there's a very particular effect. It is a moment, a landscape tinged with a deep, brooding purple, although there is truly no one object of that color here. I pass by a broken cleft that hides a cave, and come across the ashmires. The bubbling, musty scent reached me first, but I disregarded it until the first of the terraced pools came into view.

If ebony is godsblood, ashmire muck is his vomit. Its being a less lofty fluid in no way diminishes the substance's usefulness to the tribes, who resort to the heat of the churning black slime when no fuel can be had. They use it to cure hides for clothing and armor and yurt, while the wisewomen filter it to make balms. Most of all, bathing in a pool of Vvardenfell's bubbling intestinal ooze will coat the skin in a gritty layer that protects against the abrasive and infectious blasts of a blight storm.

But I didn't know that then. Instead the great sweep of what lay ahead washed me over with dread. I cannot tell what it was exactly; after all, I could see my destination in the distance. At the bottom of the great slope, the glittering silver ribbon of the River Odai reflected sunlight in a well of haze. Yet something about this first exposure to the land impressed on me horribly. It was beautiful, in a way, yet awful and crushing. On I had to go, through the ashmires, those dozens and scores of little round pools, each raised up on a dais of sedimentized ooze. They were set into the incline, ringed by fringes of scathecraw like the hairy black nipples of an orc. The only time I've seen a cliffcracer land is either or to suckle at them or to die.

I know I thought that night had fallen, picking my way through that clouded, earth-heated morass. On occasion, Cosades' package bumped at my side, but the weight and presence of my surroundings otherwise steered my mind away from such concerns. The ashlands did not swallow me up (although I nearly fled from the thumping of scribes, till I saw their size and visage), and the sun was shining somewhere, somewhere just up ahead.

This has gone on long enough. I'll leave out the moment when I turned slightly left to find the sun, some happy tears and a bridge across the Odai. And how the many miles after that—first through silent rocky scrubland and then the fertile valley of green(!) trees and emperor parasols—were so very short by comparison. I bought Kwama eggs from a redguard miner, whose appearance was as welcome as the sun itself, tasted disgust and relief in their thick yokes, and reached Balmora by nightfall.

Balmora deserves an introduction, for what it was to me then and perhaps remains now. But it's not going to get one from me, as I've been badly failing my charge not to be retrospective.

Scratch that. I wrote it the honest way, and it didn't work out. Despite what you may have noticed is my prodigious memory, the moment has fled to somewhere deep and cobwebby and past. Whatever happened that night, it can't be dredged back up. So with a thousand pardons (or am I the only soul who cares?), I will resort to the phenomenon of Balmora in the daytime.

Start with a dull iron horseshoe. Dip it in the boiling blood of a slaughtered rebel, an eviscerated scarab, our resident slain god. Now that it glows red-hot, it is soft and malleable and reeks of dangerous freedom. Stand it on end and hammer down on it from above, until the horseshoe flattens out into a longer, gentler shape. Now a stretched letter U, a Velothi boatman's hat inverted, a cleft between hills and a volcanic valley. Float a river through this space, stone the banks into coffee-colored walls and put your city on either side. But not quite yet.

First there is the meteoric bluff (upon whose stooping foothill you will build your acropolis) glowering over it all at the northern corner. The peak above is a single piece of rock, a surge of stilled fire that catches the mountain wind. Cries of racers dwelling there remind the happy Hlaalu in the bazaars below what manner of land this really is, short miles from all such sanctuaries of flowing water and crab grass. It is not a large mountain, nor truly anything more than a great boulder, and the whole valley appears deceptively small from any vantage. Leave it to the city to fill up that space and fold it upon itself sixteen times until it becomes bigger. Likewise, the hills that bound the low spaces seem sheer from afar, but only on the western side do they approach the steepness of a foyada. Though they are studded with tall outcroppings like corpus cysts, the hills flatten out before your feet as you approach.

I still have yet to come to the city itself. There is the smooth vertical ululation of the walls, a straight line without crenels or gates from where they arc over the river, to the guardtowers where the eastern ridge begins. Only the valley entrances are fortified; the hillsides are left to the terraces of Dunmeri dwellings with roofs like loaves of bread.

Immediately, the impression is of a warren. A native warren at that, despite the wide, irregularly-shaped plaza at the south entrances ringed by orderly shops and imperial guilds. At some point in my travels I had occasion to glance at the census of 3E 425, and Balmora is full of outlanders by any standard, yet this somehow does not factor into the faces seen in the streets. From the strider port at the gate to the similarly long-legged bonemold automatons strutting about the main thoroughfares, Balmora is a Velothi town, absolutely teeming with life.

What did I see, those first days? A Telvanni baron in his bug armor, crippled and knotted by the sorcerous carapace that preserved him into his ruinous, unnatural old age. A betty netch hung with banners from its neutered tentacles, while her handler sang the praises of the southeast wind. Small children, their lips green with hackle-lo, leaping into the river with tiny skiffs hung over their heads like the webs of flying spiders. A procession of bricklayers and weavers on the way to hightown to present a petition to the Hlaalu. Off-duty legionaries in tan tunics and bracers devouring the cobbles with long strides, on their way past Khajiiti street magicians armed with cantrips.

But Balmora is not a warren. True, both banks possess a definite residential interior, with a confusion of awnings, clogged markets, drainage ways, street-bridges, sudden steps and stoney dead-ends, yet the layout is essentially rational. Like the Bitter Coast, the city is a presence in the air, yet here the effect comes from a great noise, expressed in jocular Odai dialect, reverberating from the lattice of indestructible Vvardenfell mudbrick all about you.

In truth, this description is not too dishonest, for I experienced it all promptly, the morning after I collapsed exhausted into a bed I paid too much for, at a Breton-run inn. I wandered the streets for a while, gnawing on scuttle and jangling the few coins in my pocket. Logically, I knew that I was no

more welcome here than at Seyda Neen, but I threaded my way through the ash-faced throng with something like joy anyhow. It was a place I could get the tiniest purchase on, for no city can be entirely strange to a CiCi. I walked with a pleasure that overlaid the sense of churning doom in my gut, for if I did not make good on my inexplicable government contact here, starvation was fast approaching. Starvation, or the far-worse gambit to stave it off. Perhaps it took me a moment to turn over the proverbial moth wing, and read my fate.

Loth to speak to anyone and betray my foreign tongue (though the sheer variety in the Dunmeri faces on display put me at ease about my ambiguous appearance somewhat), I found my own way to the South Wall Cornerclub.

Open the door to the club (just a bar, really), and immediately I get a sharp look from a Nord in an earth-colored robe. This place isn't like any tavern I've seen, just a corridor heading down some stairs. I suppose it's my first real Vvardenfell building, with all the life happening underground. Several characters on the way. An armored Khajiit smelling of the sugar, a wizened Bosmer of uncertain gender. At the end of the hall, it opens out into a festively-furnished tavern, with a Western-style counter and sumptuously dressed Illiac barman. I order a drink and make eye contact with this sort of mage-looking lizard on the stool next to me. For some reason I find it easy to talk to Argonians, as if their not truly fitting in anywhere makes the social bridges quicker to cross. They do always insist on introductions, though, and this fellow has quite the handle.

"So then, Only-He-Stands-There, do you know of a Caius Cosades? I heard I could find him here."

"Here? Here he is not often to be found." The Argonian turns and hisses at the barkeeper.

"Rielle! When's the last time you heard tell of that old sugartooth Cosades?"

Sugartooth?

"Cosades? I couldn't rightly say. Who wants to know?"

"That'd be me," I pipe up. "I have to meet him and conduct some business."

"Business? You have *business* with Caius Cosades?" Whoreson of Hircine, he has to bellow that just as the drums in the corner hit a lull. I miss Cyrodiil, where tavernkeepers are discrete. This one guffaws. "You *are* at the South Wall, but still, I admire your brazenness. Fear not, none of the shell-heads shall hear of your 'business' from us. I should hope."

The patrons are looking at us now. Damn it. I drain my glass.

"Caius hasn't graced our establishment in a fortnight or so, but he's an easy enough man to find. Tends to stay holed up in a bed-and-basket on the north side of town. Northeast, that is. How are you with directions?"

"Never had a problem in that department."

"Fine then. Take a right out the door and keep on until you get to the highest street on this side of the river. I don't mean the slum terraces, I mean the highest main street that runs straight across, clear to the north wall. Right? Cosades' house is fairly easy to spot, because it's exactly at the end of that street. If you just kept walking, you'd run your nose straight into it."

"And the door knocker is brass, shaped like ram's head," offers a nearby Khajiit in a blouse.

"My thanks. Fair day to all." I pay for the drink and try to ignore the quizzical glances that have made their way around the room like contagion. Heading back up towards the street, I mentally catalog the possibilities. Maybe the Imperials gave Sellus Gravius the wrong names. Maybe they are too lazy to deliver their own notices of tax arrears. Or else the Empire has cast off its obsession with legality and is sending their prisoners to work for drug-addled pimps as a cruel joke. That last holds my suspicions for the longest period of time, at around eight seconds. By the time I reach ground level, I'm out of answers and can only go forward. Cosades' "bread-and-basket" (all this time later and I still have not heard this term again) is clear across town. I clutch his package to myself like a frightened child.

It is far less crowded up here on the side of the hill, and the foot traffic has fallen into the danger zone where a curious-looking outlander is conspicuous and interesting. The border ridge is

passing by to my right, two stories up. Judging by the sparse grass and gray surface, the peak catches some ash every now and then. The mental impact of the wastes has worn off already, after my march through mundane Oblivion, and the bare slopes look like a good refuge if this city becomes suddenly hostile. I learned as a CiCi (though never firsthand) that you always think you can sleep in an alleyway, just for one night. You can't.

The house stands at the end of the dirt street, blocking passage to the walls just as the publican said it would. Like its neighbors, the front has only the one small window, made of green translucent resin. That makes it easy to approach. And I believe that then, I dragged my fingers across the rough, crumbling surface of the wall, tracing an uncertain path towards the door. At least, that is what I did before every subsequent visit, when in the months ahead I dashed to and from that flaking, warped front door with all possible speed.

In that moment so long ago, yet situated squarely in the present compared to the other past I've lived, Naleva touched the brass knocker. Its stained, yellowy bulk was the primary detail that set Cosades' dwelling apart from the others, verifying my choice of address. And yet, no answer to the first knock. Dibby's Cooch, that won't do! No answer is the end of me. Knock again, and hear a grating cough from the far side. Was that a summons? It will have to suffice. Lean in on the door.

It swings open through the meek rattle of a broken latch. Hell of deadbolt there, though. The sun is shining in that filtered, whitened Vvardenfell sort of way, and through a blue sky full of puffy clouds, but little of it brightens this interior. Out of the darkness comes the acrid sweetness of moonsugar, waves of it beading sweat on your nose and bursting saliva from your gums. A point of light in the opposite corner winks out as soon as my eyes can catch it.

"Hello?" I call.

Nothing but another cough, and the shifting sound of someone definitely awake. The interior shutters are all closed, but now I can see the outline of bedposts.

"Cosades?"

Shit! That noise is the slow winding of a crossbow. Backpedaling towards the door...

"I have a message from Seyda Need! They sent me to you."

The loading stops with a curt click. I brandish the package.

"Here, damnit! Do you want it?" No answer fast enough. I dig in with my nails and rip open the taught fabric, simultaneously kicking open the door. In the renewed sunlight, we can both see the contents, a series of sewn pages covered in a mass of nonsensical characters. Is this actually a joke after all?

Clunk.

In the light from the entranceway I can see that the crossbow has been set on a round table. By the Divines, it was loaded with a *fork*.

A sallow, soft-edged voice, clearly Colovian.

"Leave the package. And come back at sunset, if you've further business."

Not a chance I'll play my part and let this shadowy sugartooth leave me to the cold. I am out the door in a single motion, the ciphered documents clenched in my fist.

Of course, I'm not ten paces down the road before I know that I'll be back at sunset. Whoever this fellow is, he and his bosses owe me my life on this island, and he *will* deal with me. The documents in the package are printed on thick, official-looking sheets of paper, but they are nothing I can pawn (though the South Wall seems a likely place for that sort of thing). Furthermore, this mess of code—which I try to conceal from passerby in futile paranoia—means danger. I'll get back to Cosades if I have to kick his door down, but there is probably a steep price to pay for any other games played with the imperials here. Maybe he just needs to sober up, because the dozen words I heard came from a

head that was pretty clearly well-baked. And the fork crossbow? After my illegal deportation and continental crossing, I had not imagined that the Empire could fall lower in my estimation.

Well, I had enough money left for a noon meal. I walked west down the steps, following the wall so as not to get lost. Best not to return to the cornerclub. From the two weeks I spent as professional thief (tell you about that some other time), I knew the sort that gathered there.

Back across the river, then, catwalking on the bridge's thick railing to avoid a small convoy's worth of pack guar.

Oh, right. Sorry, a convoy's worth of what-in-Kynnies-name-are-those-nearly-fall-in-the-river-from-staring-beasts. They have a (fat) dragon's legs and tail, with the bulbous, oversized smiling head from the whale preserved in the Skyrim hall of the Imperial Exposition. Their amiable wrinkled eyes and chicken-leg arms make the guar an endearing animal until you approach within the twenty-foot radius of their stench. And I have seen a rutting bull kill a would-be rustler with a single devastating kick.

I continued on uphill, towards the mansions and official buildings of hightown, shadowed in their twin guardtowers. Just past the river where the north wall stops, the monk accosted me. The monk or the Tribunal equivalent, that is. Even now I am not entirely educated on the specificities of Temple offices.

“Alms! Alms for the servants of the Three! Alms and Mother's Mercy to the blighted faithful of Vos, the corpruscent farmers of West Gash! For the benighted pilgrims before Mount Assarnibibi and their defence, and for the labor of the Living Ancestors and the kin-spirits that wail for our salvation in their Ghostfence!”

The ash-withered fossil with the expansive lungs paced up and down in his dusty robe, clutching a bonemold offering box while his white eyebrows danced. Seeing me walk past in solitude, he thrust the rounded receptacle before my chest and side-stepped along beside me, repeating his call with no change in volume.

I must have shrugged him off with too much irritation on my face, for he drew back and tucked his carapace beneath one arm, brows gathering like a storm.

“And who are you, heedless sister, to renounce the workers of ALMSIVI so shamelessly?”

“Ams...sivi?”

“Aye, the Living Ancestors, Promised of Veloth, Anticipated in the Waters Above, feared by the House of Troubles.” He reached out with a pointing finger, stopping just short of my nose. “Mercy, Mystery, Mastery. Know the Three, sister, the spirits and thy lords.” And he stroked my cheek with that one finger. I felt the ashlands on it.

“And are you my brother?” I asked. Good job facing down the frothers, Naleva. A lifetime of preparation in the spiritual madhouse of Tamriel has served you well.

“As are all the children of Veloth, we family of three spirits and the three gods of the deified generation. Surely you see this, sister? All the Dunmeri must.” His voice was quieter now, so any spectators decided that the display was over. Somehow the zealous little fellow had steered me away from the street, to the shadowed wall of a bakery.

“But am I Dunmer?”

He favored me with a piercing, victorious look. His eyes were less red than most, seemingly studded with flecks of volcanic glass.

“Aha! Thusly I asked you from the first. 'Who are you,' to do as you have done? Who indeed?” Suddenly his hand was in mine, a prickly barbed thing with a light touch. “Come with me, sister, and I will answer your question for you.”

And he was pulling me forward, up the stepped path to Balmora's unobtrusive temple, its windowed dome and tusk-shaped courtyard walls.

“Fear not, milady. I feel the countenance of the Poet in you, and he holds strange admixtures in no ill light. Far from it! He delights in duality and contradiction.”

The sparsely-populated Temple yard contained a font and little else. My wiry proselytizer dumped his container of drakes, resin crystals and glass shards into the font and, to my surprise, placed the collection box upon his head. Half a second's adjustment, and it became a wide-brimmed ceremonial helmet, entirely covering his face and hair.

"Now I shall be your guide and advocate. Follow me, sister...?"

"Naleva." Shock at how effortlessly he plied me for my name, and combated skepticism with curiosity.

"Enter then, Naleva, and we shall see if the spirits recognize you. Naleva. A good name." He held the door open.

Like many Vvardenfell temples, the interior was plain, even drab. Unlike, say, a Colovian chapel, most Dunmeri houses of worship do not attempt to convey a sense of the otherworldly in their architecture. Even for the natives, the otherworld is right here, in the Star-Wounded East, and the gods dwell here too, in the temporal palaces they built for themselves. Except for ensconced candles and a large tapestry depicting Veloth's exodus, the walls of the temple were unadorned, the same ubiquitous brown earthen material as everywhere else. The place sported a metal dome, though, set around the base with little windows of real, Cyrodiil-style glass (although stained and frosted). Beneath this dome, like a reflection, sat the Soulpit, a round dais of bone-scattered grave dust. On the far side of that focal point, I could see three short altar-monoliths with their engravings, the priest on duty, and passageways to the more mundane rooms.

"Welcome, sister. It is not a long ritual, and will take but a minute."

The words were the same, but the voice changed inside the mask, becoming sonorous and laden with something. I noticed that the priest by the wall had bowed as we came in.

"Take up the brush," the conch-headed figure intoned, referring to a small iron rake lying on the side of the Soulpit. "Stir the ash."

I did so with incredulity, tracing seven parallel lines in the soot.

"Disinter your own beginnings as you do. Make yourself ready for the entrance of all forefathers."

Someone at whom I dared not look up at arrived with fragrant candles. The holyman standing at my back began throat-singing in Old Velothi, and the spine-tingling sounds echoed about the interior of the bonemold shell, flowing between its various chambers like the tide. The wavering hum of his voice swelled in strength, causing the pale surface of the carapace headpiece to vibrate. Finally he hit upon three great pounding high notes, and with each one, the Soulpit jumped. A thin film of silt popped into the air, scattered particles disassociating themselves from the rest as if the ground had been struck by a great shuddering weight. The sides of the dais, however, like the stones I knelt on, remained perfectly still.

"They are spoken!" my interlocutor exclaimed. "Do you feel them, sister?"

In perfect truth I experienced a chill that spread from my legs to the tips of my ears. There was also a chorus of sudden whispers, erupting from someplace without. The monk clapped his hands behind my head, and I turned in surprise, but when he made the sound two more times, it emanated from the mask. His hands never left his sides.

As I looked back, the grave dust stirred, as if it housed some sort of burrowing reptile. My interpreter pulled the helmet from his sweaty head and bent over the low dais with interest.

"Your ancestors do not lie here, Naleva, not since nineteen generations. The souls claim you, though, and direct you on, to where you must find your ageless earth. The progenitors of your line dwell on this sacred isle, in fact. See the jumbled bones."

He extended that finger of his toward a new arrangement of teeth and skull fragments, over where the ash had jolted.

"So that..."

"Is a sign of where to find your people, or at least the ever-living half." He smiled kindly.

“Northeast, I should say.”

“So my mother was from Vvardenfell...”

“A mother? Was it? No, a mother is a tiny little thing. A hallowed constellation stretching back across the ruin of time, yes, that was from Vvardenfell. So let us return to the original issue. Are you Dunmer? By these signs, yes, the spirits assure you. But can you in good conscience assign the name to yourself? This is doubtful. Seek your ancestors. Earn the right.” He let the shell swing down to hang at his side. Another smile. “And when you do, think kindly of the three God Ancestors that still live, and brought you hence.”

I stood, awkwardly.

“Is it expected to give alms? I have very little to offer.”

“It is the thought, really.”

Dropping a single coin into the container dangling beside him, I departed the temple in seven long, hurried steps.

Now I have something to chew on. And I'm hungry, too. Finding food at market is a task requiring a newcomer's full attention, however, and for a while the temple and its dirt quit my mind. Western bread is extremely expensive here so I procure some porridge of ash yam and saltrice, with marshmellow-sweetened tea. So there I am, sitting on one of Balmora's scores of stepped streets, sorting through my first enjoyable Vvardenfell meal and my first religious experience.

Or should I say, first divine experience, assuming that fellow wasn't a total charlatan. I've had plenty of religious experiences, in the sense that religion is something that's done to you, rather than something you feel. Gallenus the heretic never took us to temple, although he deemed certain occasions suitably vague in their theology to match his private beliefs. And being that it was the City of the Thousand Cults, festivals were a regular occurrence, some boasting miracles that would hold the public imagination for several entire days.

And then here in a dusty corner of one of the Emperor's far-flung possessions, a pile of ash says that I'm home. And physically speaking, I suppose it's right. Normally when men and mer bear offspring, it is the mother's child, with but a few distinguishing marks from the father's people. Many a highborn imperial official was born of an Altmer handmaiden or governess in service to a Nibenese household, with no question of their elven racial identity. But I suppose my father's seed was just too much for a poor Dunmeri womb, dulling my ears and facial structure. Or perhaps the Bosmer in there threw off the recipe, upsetting the balance of my concoction with unexpected merishness.

Of course I have Dunmer ancestors, how could I not? But it remains strange to think that they could remain intact, 'alive' in the Velothi sense, whether animated, ensconced in urns or ghost walls. And that the temple's spirits should recognize me, as if by word of mouth. How does that happen? Does some long-dead bureaucrat pen an astral letter and send it to the family plot by carrion fly? One thing I know, is that the Temple's Three didn't come up with all this. It is something essentially Velothi, and older than they are. The Triunes are pretty damn old, though, almost as old as the First Empire, and who the hell were the Cyrodils and CiCis before then?

Either way, this land's bones are willing to name me Dunmer while I doubt many of its people are. Though one of them does seem to think that I can try and qualify. Good to know that I can take that role in the future if needed, in a dishonest sort of way.

I set these thoughts in motion, meandering through the backstreets of the commercial district until I draw near the southern walls again. My tea is just finished as I hear the ripple of festive laughter from above me. There appears to be some sort of drinking establishment up a flight of stairs. Yes, the steps are set into the side of another cornerclub, its reddened windows keeping an eye on the strider port across the way. For whatever reason, I decide that from the roof of this Council Club, I can sit and

drink and keep an eye on Cosades' place, despite the intervening distance.

Fling away the drinking gourd and its dregs, and on up to the roof with its tanin-colored awning and paper lanterns. I do my best native impression, but the laughter stops instantly as I set foot on the top step. It's a small group of Dunmer men and an Argonian slave (the first I've seen so far), all with mock-ashlander facial tattoos, mohawks and leather armor. There is an outdoor bar in the near corner, but they seem to be running it themselves, from the customer's side, for their own thirst. The one on the right scowls at me, but the rest just gaze, motionless figures exuding clouds of thickening hostility. Thunderstruck, all I can manage is an uneasy smile. Any CiCi walks into the wrong scene every now and then, but this is like nothing else. I spin on my heel and make the third quick exit of the day, passing another dark elf on the way down. He halts on a middle step to stare at me until I reach the corner, surprise and curiosity on his face. The lip of that damn roof follows me with daggers as I walk away, yet happily I turn right up on the doorstep of last night's inn. The Lucky Lockup, indeed.

Yes, I'm being careful with my money until I see how things turn out, but one drink won't be the difference between life and death. I've twenty drakes left, and spend a few of them on whatever the barman says is closest to Cyrodilic stuff. Comberry wine, or shein, as I know it now.

There's an Argonian with maroon forehead spines sitting in the corner, tuning his lute (so happy to see that I have not left such scenes behind in the capital). Not long in a strange city and solitude becomes oppressive, so I motion to join him.

"Welcome." A throaty rasp.

"A fine day to pass in here with the drink," I observe.

"I, Chuna, do not like quiet songs."

"You, ah, don't say."

"And songs I do not like, I do not often know to play, so do not ask. Please, that loud songs are strange, awkward to sing in such quiet places, for only one to appreciate."

"I, Naleva, hadn't thought to enlist your bardly services, merely to share your company. And besides, songs aren't everything. What does your professional wit have to offer on those Council Club types next door? Not the cheeriest sort."

A hiss. Would that I had the ability of an old Nibenese friend, who could interpret the full range of emotions and reactions in the Argonian hiss.

"There Chuna will never play, even when the Odai flows north and I am invited."

"Old fashioned types, are they? Not keen on the opening of immigration and Imperial settlement?"

"And not only. Quick of knife and short of mercy. A house with cruel eyes, home to only the Camonna Tong. Surprising that you set foot there."

"Set foot *on* there, really." I blink. "Honestly, I thought that the Tong was just a Cyrodiil City outfit, immigrants and whatnot."

"Nonsense. They are from here, across generations of sugar and chains."

"How bright and sunny a day," remarks a smooth voice behind me, "to be talking of the Tong."

"Good afternoon, Todwendy." Chuna bobs his scaly head to the Redguard woman who has drifted up to our table. "A song, perhaps?"

"He didn't want to play for me." My tone is flippant, watching this newcomer's lips shift into fascinating shapes as she flows downwards into a chair. I feel her leg occupy the space next to mind, but otherwise the process is silent.

"For this one I will perform," Chuna grinned. "So pretty, so pretty."

"Chuna, you *deviant*." She shoots him a brilliant expression. "But really, good weather is so boring. Darken the mood. For what do you and your guest discuss the Tong?"

"Naleva has been *their* guest, and discovered their sour countenance."

Todwendy looks over at me for the first time, with her captivating face and bizarre Breton name.

"Not for any period of time, I hope!"

I manage to shake my head.

"All of them answer to the Ascadians, now," Chuna explains with satisfaction. "Those in the Isles have the land and connections to do business in this new imperial world, with its exports exciting... and troublesome."

"They are fixing up a war, Naleva. If you know any sweet young urchin boys who work for the Thieves Guild, tell them to book passage for Windhelm as fast as they can. It's cold there, but even colder in the grave."

Chuna nods in satisfaction at her words.

"A bloody time in the offing, yet one which will produce no fine songs. Unless you ensnare in a coil of forbidden love, the son Orvas Dren does not have, my dear."

"Ech, I am soon gone from Morrowind and away from this tanglesome business." She shoots me a teasing glance, and I look down into my cup. "Were I to remain, it would be hard to ply my trade without indirect involvement with one group or the other. Independence is to be valued above all things."

"And yet with those words you sound so at home here," Chuna cackles.

Todwendy raps her nails in the tabletop.

"Do not speak to me of Dunmer chafing, so soon after another of those slaughters. This province will put aside its religious viciousness, or else I hope Uriel looks into his forefathers' ways to administer a true Cyrodilic beating on these dark elves."

"What slaughter?" I inquire.

"So she does speak after all! More killings by nativists. Of missionaries, usually, or new settlers. At least the imperial officials do *something* to deserve it, but it's rarely they who catch the knife. This last was in Gnisis."

"They say the Temple is behind it," Chuna rasps. "Indoril agents. Or rogue Telvanni. Or Redoran zealots."

"They always blame the Temple, and while I doubt the Tribbies are unduly dismayed by violence against outlanders, they have too much to lose by taking part. But the murders *are* religious. I wonder if it's not some new group entirely."

"This one, she is so clever. A song, my dear, a song for you."

"Not today, Chuna, I am not *that* bored. And I have business up at hightown soon. The Hlaalu are never satisfied. Besides," she stands, favoring me with a wry smile, "I don't think your friend here wants to talk to me very much."

"You see?" Chuna exclaims. "You drive away my muse! Now we will both need another drink."

Precious few drakes in pocket, the buzzing in my head just fading away. Dusk is setting fire to the particles of volcanic glass that hang in the air over hightown, a true Vvardenfell sunset. It's also time to go see Cosades again, with the mutilated package partially reconstructed from borrowed twine. Stepping down from the bridge now. Remember that the most likely reason for this mission is still a case of mistaken identity, your name scrawled on the wrong document. (Somehow the portentous business with the Moth Priest in the Lockbox had slipped from my considerations.) More than a fair chance, Cosades will want nothing to do with you. Righto then, Naleva, I'll sell his package to him for as much as I can and then screw off. To where? Oblivion, for all I know, but I'll have some money's time to think it through, and I *will* have my money. Damned Empire of Cyrodiil has a debt coming in.

As I shuffle alongside the wall of Cosades' home, the sun has just kissed the top of the western ridge, blowing out the bottom of Magnus' smooth orb in a splatter of shifting rays. I'm mere paces from the door when I hear the slow scratching noise from above, like a boy whittling with a dull kitchen

knife.

“Cosades!” I call up at the roof.

“Hmnn.”

“Do you want this delivery, or not?” Let any eavesdroppers interpret that as they will.

An answer.

“You are a long ways from the City, you know. Come up here and have a seat for a while.”

Damn, this fellow knows his accents. Also, the voice bears no resemblance to that I heard earlier, besides coming from the same throat. More of that scratching as I head up the side stairs to the sitting area on the roof, and the sound of a small wooden object being set on a table.

“Good evening. You have something for me?”

A bare-chested baldpate, more at ease reclined amongst his Dunmeri furniture than I would have thought possible. He looks every bit the old soldier, with the set, stoic face of any number of the Emperor's generals. This one is a bit different, however. None of the pomp in him, severe, but lacking the air of a martinet. The eyes have it, arrestingly sharp, the sort for which the adjective 'flinty' was devised. *This* is the old sugartooth?

“Two things for you, in fact. Out of Seyda Need this past day.”

Cosades leans forward, a movement of exacting softness.

“I see. And what is your name, that they have sent you to find me.”

“I'm Naleva... and Sellus Gravius sent me to you.”

He glances briefly down at the street.

“Come. Let us do this indoors, despite the excellent sunset. And tell me, Naleva, what is your family name?”

“None in particular.” Somehow, he gets ahead of me, to lead down the stairs.

“A Dunmer without a surname? I've never heard of such a thing as that.”

“Well, that's just the thing, isn't it.”

His house still smells of sugar, but there are lit candles and unshuttered windows now. The furnishings are barely adequate in the one-room hut, as if the rooftop area is just for show.

“You mentioned two things for me, Naleva. One, I see, an encoded missive which you defaced somewhat. A poor show for a courier. And the second—“

—“Is me, as I'm not a courier.” He leans back on the table, closing his eyes momentarily.

“They... repatriated me here, told me I'd be provided for. Just so long as I followed instructions. They told me to *report*—the very word—to you, with this package, and that you'd have more for me to do.”

Cosades sighs and begins pulling a black linen shirt on over his head.

“Where are you from, Naleva?”

“From Nibennium, sir, you knew that.”

“And what did you do there?”

“Why—I'm an orphan.”

“You're too old to be an orphan, you know.”

“Don't quite see how that works out.”

“It's quite alright. Some of our best people are professional orphans.”

Standing there in his entranceway is fast becoming uncomfortable.

“Tell you what, Naleva. I will have work for you tomorrow, or soon after. As my courier, say. There's money for an inn on the table. I will need to digest your correspondence there, if you'll allow me...” Somehow he gets me to hand over the package, and I'm stalled there with nothing else but his promise and the ten drakes on the table. “I recommend the boarding house on the corner, two streets down. You'll have enough left over for a meal, then.”

I fail to move.

“When should I come back?”

“Oh, first thing. I rise early on working days. Good evening, Naleva.”

The way out is no more certain than the way in.

The third visit to Caius Cosades. I spent another night at the Lucky Lockup despite its relative expense. It's a fine establishment, smelling of home, and the name is an amusing take on my own experience of the last month. Besides, there was Chuna there to listen to, and Todwendy dropping by to give the weak drink a bit more of a kick. She would also share various adroit observations on the state of the province, like the recent politicized celebration of the Armistice and the furor it kicked off, or Great House competition and the Imperial mineral monopoly. I tried to steer the conversation that way, and clear of my own life, for discretion had been the unsaid word in Caius' brief sentences.

It was a rainy morning, and rain in Vvardenfell sounds like metal beads shattering on the hard ground. Of course, now I rue sleeping on the exact opposite side of town, and having to walk through all this in my one and only set of light clothes.

"Good to see that you don't balk at the elements." Cosades meets me at the door. "Just don't try to face an ashstorm with the same attitude. New agents are hard to come by here." He gestures at the table, with its breakfast that most definitely, mercifully, contains bread. Saltrice reminds me too much of home, while falling sadly flat before the Nibenean variety.

"I'm your agent, then?"

"They told you to await orders, yes? Just think of yourself as my personal assistant, one who won't ever be on duty in my actual presence." He radically improves my mood with a distracted, acknowledging wave at the food. "Whatever vague notion you have of my position and role here will suffice, for now, but a word of warning. Your knowledge of me is quite capable of putting me in danger were it to become commonly available, so you may just imagine what, concurrently, my own knowledge could do to you."

It is an illustrative threat, but completely without malice. I feel assessed, and am suddenly loth to come up wanting.

"Understood."

"Capital. And with that I invite—or rather order—you to embark on a project of research."

"Research?"

"The information I received from Cyrodiil has exposed my ignorance at every turn. Your findings will educate us both. Which reminds me. Can you defend yourself?"

"Can I what?"

Non sequiturs were strange from his lips. It's a question to give one pause, too. I and every girl I knew could nick an artery in a situation bad enough. But such a feminine (in the City, at least) defense is far removed from fighting, much less combat. I'm spry enough, I know, but those quarterstaff lessons in the Cheydinhal highlands were a lifetime ago. True, I flattened everyone in the class under the age of twenty, but the expertise went to seed after that. You don't want to flaunt a martial skill in the City, not when so many are eager to prove themselves your better, and when mathematically speaking several hundred of them must be. The supposedly civilized capital of all Tamriel harbors many a sort who think nothing of hitting a girl, and I suppose it's the same way here.

"I ask because it might come up. I don't intend to use you for violence, but that doesn't mean I won't lose you to it."

I show him my pen knife with a diffident look.

"I see. Before anything else, go and buy yourself something a touch more intimidating. And some travel-ready clothes will be equally important. If you don't make a nuisance of it, you can store things here." He produces a coin purse, the girth of which makes my eyes widen. The reaction does not go unnoticed. "Remember what I said earlier." Cosades' tone makes no doubt as to the reference.

"Spend it discreetly and sparingly."

“And after that?”

“After that, your first assignment. You know where to find the Fighters in town?”

“Same plaza as the other guilds?”

“Just so. The drillmaster there is Hasphat Antabolis.”

“And a mouthful.”

“Indeed. Some of us are born too Nibenese for our own good. But don't interrupt. Antabolis is an acquaintance of mine, and fancies himself a scholar. I would meet with him myself where he not constantly surrounded by lip-flapping mercenaries.”

I squeeze rainwater from my hair (remember to crop it to pre-prison length) into a saucer while he continues.

“You are to ask for all the information he has on two subjects, the—should I write this down?”

“No need. I remember everything.”

“Yes, well, I expect your results in writing. I need information concerning two local sects, both obscure and illegal. The Nerevarine Cult and the Sixth House.”

“The Sixth House Cult and...”

“The Nerevarine Cult. Really, you should learn as much from this as I do, and understanding any of it will require some background knowledge. No point being part of history if you can't comprehend it.” A rare grin. “Come to think of it, take this volume here, a concise account of Morrowind since the Merethic. You have no business in this business without the basics.”

“Can I just ask for Hasphat, or should I be more discreet?” The book appears harmless enough.

“Oh, no need. I plan for you to remain permanently unconnected to me. Although, you have already blundered in twice, so no point worrying about that in the future. Just be advised; I owe Antabolis a rather hefty favor as it stands, and he may ask you to return it. Don't expect my assistance, if his request is in reason. This is, in part, a test of the Emperor's wisdom.”

“I was sent here by the Em—”

“More on that later. Best of luck, Naleva.”

And he shunts me out the door just like that. Off I go across town again, but at least the rain has slowed to just blowing mist. The Guild of Fighters has a cramped exercise yard in the back, and it abuts a market. Now that I have the money, I buy a traveler's coat at a stall run by an old crone (Although as a settled ashlander, maybe she's not much older than I. Imperial ebony mines will age you right up). The long tunic is a dull red, with a netch skin inner layer to ward off blown ash and some of the rain. Most important are the hood and long sleeves; they'll let me pass for native much more easily.

Looks like girls tend to line up at the walls of the guild yard to watch musclebound swords-for-hire sweat on each other. It's an easy place to blend in, but only the pretty ones are likely to gain entrance this way. So out to the front street.

Putting my shoulder into a jammed iron handle, I almost collide with a mailed woman on the way out the main door. She looks pale and irate, but both are likely just everyday Nordic characteristics.

“Do you have business here?”

Well, give me a minute. I'm definitely not carrying anything that could be construed as a delivery, nor do I resemble any manner of Fighters Guild client. So what does that leave? Prostitute? Guild member, Talos forbid?

“Master Antabolis is expecting this today.” I wave Cosades' book by the spine, but reverently so. My obstacle wiggles her nose in an abrasive sort of way.

“Kyne's Breath, why does he only take interest in the dusty ones?” True, the cover and binding are fairly worn.

“Do you know where I might find him? The missive only mentioned the guild generally, and he wants to receive it in person.”

“Aye. Just keep heading down the stairs until you get to a practice room that feels like an orcish

oven.”

“My thanks.” I step back to allow her through first.

True to word, the building goes down and down, windowless clay corridors with an unvarnished wooden lattice supporting the ceiling, all to shelter its occupants from the ash that hasn't come down in generations. And after the second gentle staircase it *is* hot, and damp, as if we're down to river-level. Ahead's the broad practice room covered in mats of stuffed netch leather. Only one man inside, this time of day, of slight build with papery face and thinning hair, but arms like braided rope.

“Hasphat Antabolis?” Best to go out on a limb (as the Bosmer say), for the sake of a good first impression.

“And you are?”

“Naleva of Polefel.” I invent a second name on the fly, and by Mephala, this one will do in the future. Even though the syntax is Breton. “Might I have a word in private?”

He eyes Cosades' book, clearly making a number of wrong guesses as to my intentions and identity.

“Very well.” A plain acquiescence that betrays nothing. We enter a side room filled with polearms and two low benches.

“Master Antabolis, I understand that you are a student of Morrowind lore.”

“Only a very few understand as you do.”

“Including, for instance, the lore of the Sixth House and Nerevarine Cults?” I drop the book onto the bench beside me, concealing the title. No need to be seen reading the Novice's Guide to Ignorance while seeking credibility.

“A curious subject,” he exclaims, although it's clear that the adjective applies more to my query. “I wonder how you came to know of my work on the resurgence of the Sixth House Cult.”

“Would you...” My urbane request to share his knowledge comes out stillborn. And I'd been doing so well this far.

“Of course, my research is the result of much personal dedication, some of which I plan to compile and publish via the University of Gwylim. So you'll understand that my desire to oblige your curiosity is at odds with the requirements of scholarship.”

This fellow is too polite. And a drillmaster. I drop the act.

“Look, Ant—Master Antabolis. I've come on behalf of...” the practice room remains empty, “...Caius Cosades. If you could allow us anything of use, it would—”

“Ah, but Caius has not come in person, which makes me unduly covetous in this case.” His manner changes instantly. “Old Cosades is in my debt, as a matter of speaking. I believe I can trust him with my findings, but his use of an errand girl such as yourself does stir the imagination.”

Here it comes. But instead he leans over, as fast as only a fighter can move, and retrieves the book.

“Jeanette Sitte. Not the best choice, I dare say, but not the worst either. Listen here, Naleva... of Polefel. I will draw up an ideal little dossier for my truant companion Caius Cosades, but only if you indulge my academical whims during the interim.”

“Go on.”

“In the ruins of Arkngthand—”

“Beg pardon?”

“Arkngthand. You know of the Dwemer, surely. Dwarves?”

“I know a good parcel of children's tales, at least.”

“Lovely. Any recollection you have involving steam is likely not egregiously false. But to reiterate, the ruined Dwemer acropolis of Arkngthand stands just across Foyada Mamaea. A short distance from Fort Moonmoth, in fact.”

Suddenly this favor sounds a touch more fatal, if I'm to even half-believe all the stories about the Dwarves and their steam.

“Are you familiar with the laws on the ruins, Naleva?”

“His Majesty has a monopoly on Dwemer artifacts, right?”

“Not only that, they are his *personal* property, with the death penalty for all looters and traffickers.”

Oh, balls.

“Now, I plan to turn everything I examine over to the proper authorities someday, so the violation of this law does not phase me overmuch. Why should science not benefit from my extraction of property the Emperor would otherwise never see? And besides, it is you who shall do the bulk of the violating. You or Caius. And somehow I doubt that *he* could ever face the headsman for such a paltry offense.”

“Your concern is touching, sir.” I feel I've earned that one. “But merely continue and I shall comply.”

“Excellent! You should know that Arkngthand is currently inhabited by a small band of scavengers and smugglers. They are waiting for Red Mountain to fill the foyada, so that they can move heavy objects to the coast without being interdicted by Fort Moonmoth's patrols.”

I raise my eyebrows.

“Oh, you work for Cosades, so don't look so aggrieved. The Guild caught one of their contacts, so we'll be able to swoop down on them before they make off with the loot. I'm not about to let the contents of a unique Dwemer observatory hit the black market. I'd much rather see it hanging up in the capital with my name underneath it. But when the guild has its men swarming everywhere, acquiring even small objects for the purposes of personal study becomes difficult.”

He stands to duck his head in a nearby wash basin.

“You've proven to be an exhausting guest, Naleva. But I near the end. I arranged to pre-purchase a certain bauble from the leader of the smugglers one week ago. He has since reneged on our deal, so I need you to approach him and persuade him to sell. Or you can steal it. Or bring the legion down on his head. I don't care.”

“And what is this bauble?”

Antabolis offers me a sweaty shot glass of Sujamma.

“A puzzle box. An engraven cube about the size of your fist, apparently of copper, but perfectly ageless.” He pauses for effect. “Look for circular symbols in relief, and linear scratches on various faces of the cube. That's all I want, and all I'll accept.”

For a few minutes now the sounds of sparring have been coming in from the main room outside. The grunting of an orc, and something more human. I sense that I'm on the way out.

“That's all as clear as it can be, Antabolis. I'll be back within a few days.”

“I relish your enthusiasm! Truth be told, there are any number of additional questions you should have asked before accepting such a dangerous bargain. I'm sure you and Caius have your resources, but at least you will need to know how to get through the gates. The trick is to find a valve on a pipe near the globe portal. Understand?”

I'm ushered back upstairs with a nod and not a single word further.

Midday sun on the street, and I'm nose-deep in my second cup of the Lucky Lockup's cheapest Mazte. Chuna watches my progress with half a dozen possible emotions in his inscrutable lizard eyes.

“It is a weighty world athwart us, Naleva. But still Chuna must ask, what troubles you so?”

“Trouble? Say, what timing!” Todwendy makes another of her impeccable entrances.

“Well, Chuna, how would you feel if you were stuck into the hero's role from one of your bloodier songs, all without your say-so?”

“I would say that they were looking for me, but settled for the lizard.” Todwendy's ebullience is

a bit more pronounced today. A good mood to match my gloom.

"Would that it *was* your job."

"But why must Naleva do such a thing?" Now his eyes are readable, metallic lids and all.

"Because..." A sigh. "Because I have one means of survival on this island, with no hope to leave, and my one option asks a lot of me. It's not a subject for tavern tables, but it involves hard men, and thievery."

Todwendy stirs (beautifully) at the words, but Chuna cuts in first.

"But have not you, Naleva, any other way to bread? No talents?"

I shrug.

"I'm literate."

"You could join the temple," the Redguard offers.

"Which one?" I snap without meaning to.

"*Either.*"

"Anyone of intelligence can survive," the bard presses. "Even here."

"Or," Todwendy slithers (I chose this word with an actual Argonian present) into the seat next to me, "my fascinating friend, you could let me show you how to survive instead. What *exactly* is the problem, honey? I have heard three words about it that I liked."

I'm sure I looked positively miserable just then.

"I can't tell you about it, not exactly nor inexactly... but then again, I can't *do* anything about it either."

Chuna sits up expectantly. The barman is far away.

"...Well, it's not as bad as having to steal from the Tong next door," I murmur, "but I do have to steal from a gang of smugglers."

Todwendy slaps her thigh.

"Oh! Darling girl, you don't have to *steal* from *smugglers*! You can just kill them. And not even feel bad about it afterward. They sell Skooma to peasant children and buy cheap beastfolk slaves to force-feed moonsugar packets, and cut them open on arrival." Chuna nods solemnly.

"...Kill them?"

"Or call a friend."

"To kill them?"

She smiles brilliantly.

"I do have that gift myself." I look down at my empty cup. "Satacock! You don't think that I am serious. Chuna!" she demands. "Am I serious?"

"I do not know, my muse. In my prosaic dreams, I wish that you are."

"Naleva, dear, I want to torment you less than I want to see you in a cassock. Tell me, could you handle yourself in a fight?"

A pause.

"Her hesitation speaks to something," Chuna observes.

"I'd rather be off doing the stealing part."

"Nonsense! Chuna, pick up her tab and I will let you sing that awful ballad tonight. We are market-bound, my girl."

Unsurprisingly, she moves fast, right out the door where for the first time I see the long dirk bouncing at her hip. I try and keep up, but the lower regions are none too steady after three morning drinks. Todwendy is waiting for me by the entrance, suddenly at my shoulder ushering me forward. Verily, we are market-bound.

"Er, tell me, Todwendy. What is it exactly you do?"

"Recently? Nothing of true interest. A long trip to Vvardenfell, troubleshooting for House Hlaalu. As a deniable agent, of course. Now that it's over and they almost know what hit them, I can talk about it. A little."

Now tell me why the clever Imperials didn't hire her instead.

"But to business. How were you taught to fight?"

"How..."

"If that fat Dres on the palanquin over there sent his bodyguard to rape you, for example—"

"I'd hit him between the legs with a broom handle until woodchips came out his nose."

"Bravo! Did you learn the use of a staff then, in Cyrodiil? I hear your eastern monks will not touch real weapons."

"Once... years and years ago."

"That will be good enough. An old skill isn't a lost talent, but a tradition, and tradition is something you Dunmer are adept at."

To my surprise, we stop outside the Fighters Guild.

"There is a stand with cheap guild surplus just up here," she explains. "Of course a broom handle won't do. You need something weighed and measured, with the grain spun right so it won't break on you. And made of Cyrodic haftwood, if they have it for any price."

Todwendy halts before the armaments stall that has duly materialized in recognition of her enthusiasm. In moments, she reaches down and picks out a shortsword, as long as my forearm, not counting the hilt, single-edged, with a vague falcion shape to the tip.

"Even I can tell that that's no staff."

"No weapon is truly a weapon that is not a blade, Naleva. Before the gods your soul is shaped like one, did you know that?"

"I—"

"Naleva, I will pay half if you accept a worthy instrument such as this, because I am flush and you, you almost love me already."

Somehow I had taken gentle old Chuna for the only rogue in that inn. It went on like that, with Todwendy becoming giddier and more totally in control of my every move. There was a purchased quarterstaff, some knots turning it into a sorts of spear, and lunch with sweet tea, the realization that she relished my private adoration of her, and all of a sudden we were standing at the Odai crossing beneath the town. Todwendy had grown leather armor from somewhere. Perhaps its presence—and the prospect of an hour's walk towards Fort Moonmoth—sobered her up.

"Are you well and ready to do this, Naleva? I hate not to finish a thing, once I've started it, whatever the reasons..." She looked back at the town, nonplussed by her own onslaught. "...and we have come too far now to honorably retire. By a few dozen paces, in fact. Yet I don't wish to take you where you can't follow, or if you believe it won't resolve your dilemma."

The sun yawned, and stretched out to recline in her wrinkled hair.

"Lead on."

The road east out of Balmora much resembles the Odai road into it, but for the traces of greenery on the lefthand side. It runs through yet another of Vvardenfell's narrow valleys, with ash-swept summits periodically appearing to the south.

As we walked, Todwendy effortlessly pried information out of me. That, or who knows, maybe I was anxious to share. Whether through my own caginess or her sensing of the hard limits, the conversation never touched on the circumstances that actually brought us here. She began to seem somewhat embarrassed at the way she could and did overpower me with a mere toss of her head. Now and again I caught her throwing glances, as if to see whether I would suddenly start to take offense. The rest of our passage to Fort Moonmoth was comradely, but more reserved.

"See the watchtower?"

"Whatever convinced Talos to shit out that monstrosity *here*, of all places? Gods!"

Fort Moonmoth proves to be a singularly heedless structure, its crenelations and masonry walls perfectly transplanted from the Colovian frontier. I can't imagine how far the builders had to go to quarry that pale stone. Stick another pin in the myth of Imperial practicality.

“The path to Arky leads just above the garrison, as though they're more worried about defending it than Balmora.” How fitting of her to re-cast the name of our destination as the Divine who will most likely collect my soul from there. “In truth, though, it guards the only foyada crossing outside the ashlands, and the proximity to Balmora is just a perk. Come, your eyes will bug out of your head once you see the bridge.”

Honestly, in terms of pure brute size, Arky's bridge can't compare to the great western causeway of Cyrodiil City. The Ivory Span, however, doesn't have quite the same effect, and certainly doesn't shout at you in alien tongues. The bridge here is all rust-colored metal, and the wind (mountain wind!) passing through its eighty-foot arches makes a horrendous wailing noise. Its railings are steel pipes, the walkway grooved iron. Whatever lies beyond is still shrouded in what Todwendy says is a cloud of steam seepage from the muck fields to our east.

What didn't impress me quite so much then, in my ignorance, was the desolate ravine that the bridge allowed us to cross. Looking down, I noticed a distant strip of pure ashland, its cracked soil black as pitch, completely confined to the U-shaped trench. My first look at Foyada Mamaea was the last time I would ever view it so sanguinely.

Formed by Red Mountain through some obscure process, the foyadas are the dry beds of lava rivers, and this one leads straight through Ghostgate to the Dwemer crater citadels themselves. The Star-Wound's fire burns hot, higher in temperature than dragonfire (a curious general of Talos' happened to have a dragon on hand and was able to compare), and it runs like blood. Most of the foyadas vent the lava straight to the sea, but Mamaea's great length sees it cool and pile up in a great heap north of Seyda Neen. In fact, such is the origin of the wasted heights I crossed on foot, my very first day. For whatever reason, the will of the Scarab perhaps, almost none of it sticks to the foyada's bed in the interim, so they make perfect roads, smooth and open, with only a shallow coating of blown ash. Sometimes a decade passes between the flood eruptions that fill the foyadas to their banks, and trees have time to grow on the sides. Mamaea in its lower reaches resembles a trail through a dead forest, as a large (but still only a few feet deep) outflow from the mountain last year set fire to hundreds of trees by rising heat alone. Oh, and there are more cliffacers there than anywhere else imaginable. Fuck foyadas.

“Funny fellows, the Dwemer.” The levity in Todwendy's voice cracks somewhat. “They defied the gods with every brick they laid. And look where it got them.” I refrain from asking where, and instead peer at the smoke that hides Arky from view, just across the foyada.

And then *Maramercy*, a ringing concussion in my ear and a rush of leathery, squawking noise. Two more seconds and Todwendy is helping me to my feet. I'm still too shocked to accomplish it myself, yet subconsciously lecherous enough to stagger into her gratefully as I rise.

“Cunt a' Kyne! What was that?”

“Racer,” comes the reply. “They like to dive on you when you're trespassing.”

“And what, did he try to drop a churchbell on my head?”

A crystalline laugh.

“No, that was his tail barb hitting the metal post there. Be glad it wasn't your skull; it's about the only way they can kill someone who's healthy enough to resist.” She retrieves my staff and the blade that's lashed to it. “Here. Let's hope they don't have a watch set outside Arky. You let out a bit of a whoop there, going down.”

Fantastic.

The white haze on the bluff ahead of us has begun to orbit slowly, and she eyes it with unease.

“Better put that hood up, Naleva. Could be blowing red soon.”

Yep, that cloud has definitely started shifting, and breeze tickles the side of my scalp. All at

once, a pale silk curtain evaporates, and Arky throws its arms wide, demanding to see our credentials.

A cluster of metallic towers, headed by spined turrets and paraphernalia that resembles nothing so much as torture devices. True to lore, most of it must be underground, except for jumbled pipes and vents around the blasted surface of the massif. Far to the east, an immense globe has been set into the rock, with a great protruding tree trunk of iron that angles at the heavens, shouting defiance. It is all of it subtly terrifying.

“Well, there you are, Naleva. And tomorrow morning when you finish staring, you can catch a glimpse of the sea behind you as well. Always a comforting sight, even for you mudwater types.”

There it is, too. Just a little glint down by the mouth of the Odai where I was the day before yesterday. Can't see much else, though. When I turn back, Todwendy has changed faces, her entire frame gone stiff and statuesque. And gods above, there is a man on the other end of the bridge, trying to stretch his back muscles from inside a clumsy cuirass of unsegmented iron.

“Get that poker of yours ready, Naleva. I need you to be the intimidating one.”

Oh, *that* ought to go well, since she's wearing the armor and all of the confidence. But I lower the bladed tip of my staff anyways (just as Gallenus taught us never to hold it), aiming roughly at the air above the bandit's head. He approaches, armed but not drawn, with an uneven swagger. An oldish fellow, I notice, white of hair. He leads with a scowl.

“You girls! You don't look like tourists.”

I expected Todwendy to be all words, but instead she's standing slightly behind me, with downcast eyes and the air of dormant grain hoist.

“Are you headed in to see Crito? Well you just tell him that I can stay here pissing in his air vents for as long as it takes, 'til he comes out to treat with me. That sweat deal wasn't nothing like he said it'd be, and I'll take him to task for it!”

I renew my grip on the weapon. But my companion suddenly revives.

“Oh, so you've business with Crito too?”

“Aye, the *boss*, those dogs call him.” This bridge troll seems to notice her for the first time, and splits a gap-toothed, sickly sweet smile. “But who might you be, dearie? I'm Granius, but friends call me Snowy.”

'Snowy' denoting his status as the only aged brigand in Vvardenfell, no doubt.

“Wendy,” comes the answering grunt. Her voice has entirely changed, now suited to herding violent men and brooking no insolence. “And my patron is no friend of Crito. Is that lot still underground, picking at their noses?”

“Aye, and leaving poor Snowy out here to his camp on Dagon's bridge.” Snowy gestures at a parked handcart containing a stowed tent and some supplies.

“I was dispatched,” Todwendy continues on in her severe tone, “to make contact with Crito. I and my employer have no more love for him than you, so I trust you will not get in our way.” I swear she shot me a wink, somehow.

“Get in the way... me?” Mercy, no, it's the *mountain* that's in the way. Crito is so sick of my banging on his locked doors, I don't think anyone's even within earshot of the surface anymore.” He grins. “You two'll just have to stay here and wait with little Snowy.”

“So you do not know how to gain entrance,” she states, and walks around the armored obstacle. Granius' eyes go wide.

“You can get *in*? Take me with you! I'll follow just behind and make no trouble, by Aka and Sai!”

“I doubt our intentions concerning Crito are compatible, Master Granius.”

“They are! Will be, you'll see! I'll wait until you two've concluded, then speak my piece. Your boss won't mind! Who is he?” She shoots him a contemptuous look, but carries on walking. “There's a round dozen of them in there, all ready to crack. They'll gut you, he doesn't like what you have to say.”

“I hardly think he w—”

"It's true! I rolled with these boys on down the Helnim sugar line. You should've seen how they treated the carriers!"

We all halt on her unspoken command.

"Very well, Granius. In the event that we encounter difficulties, you may follow us down, and have your pick of Crito's forfeit assets for any assistance you render us. But stay behind, stay mute, and out of sight until then. I have neither time nor patience for your pathetic feud."

"Yes, milady!"

That settled, Snowy falls in with us, trudging along too close behind me. In the seconds after we turn our attention back to the spiked summit of Arky, the roiling skyborne wave curls above us, and an ashstorm hits. It's a definite blast, like a Rumare squall in summer, yet the first reaction is pain, pain in the rasping skin of my forearms and face. I tear at my sleeves and throw on the hood, shedding ash tears. The volcanic hail pours from the surface of Granius' breastplate, glancing off at angles with a sound like falling nails. Peering through my fingers, I can just see Todwendy moving through a crimson world that's coming at me sideways. The sky looks like doomsday, and she doesn't seem to be handling the dusty torrent much better than I. But she points up at the top of the hill, and it comes to me that only I know how to open the doors.

So put your back into the climb and fight the urge to close your eyes. Need to watch your footing. The ground is all loose pebbles and sand, now starting to break off and slide downslope in the wind. Exposed flesh feels like it's being scraped off, and every few seconds a fair-sized pebble comes hurtling along to strike me in the shins. Thorny bits of broken-off scatheclaw blow past as well, the only sort of airborne object that hasn't yet caught me in the face.

Steaming past Todwendy, I enter a sort of trough in the hillside, and the ashflow lessens. There above me is a stone (the first such construction so far) archway, topped by a dome. Underneath is a coppery sphere that looks to be Hasphat's 'globe door.' I sense my Redguard companion at my shoulder, standing there to help me appraise the dome. Granius is struggling along somewhere behind.

"Well?" Amazing how the wind plucks her voice from her throat.

"Antabolis said to look for a valve." His name slips my lips unintentionally.

"That's the door there," Snowy bellows. I send him back an annoyed glance, only to see him leaning on a length of exposed pipe, trying in vain to shield his bare arms. The pipe seems out of place, and on closer inspection, the remnants of a larger mechanism stand beneath. Underneath the din of the storm, it is hissing with steam, the bronzed surface vibrating beneath Granius' touch.

"Snowy!"

"What?"

"Turn that valve there! Underneath your fat hands there!"

A moment's confusion and consternation on his face, then he screws his eyes shut and leans in on the metal knob like he's trying to strangle it. A loud screech, a puff of white vapor and then the globe door splits down the middle and the two halves rotate away from each other noiselessly. Actually a semicircle, the pair of metal slices reveal a stone portal, encrusted with runes and a large engraving of something humanoid and hostile. I step into the globe, only to have its panels slide past each other and return to the closed position, clicking shut behind my back. For a moment of near-panic, I am enclosed in that dark space between globe and stone slab, with the wind suddenly stilled so that pounds of dust fall lifelessly to the floor. Then a faint grating sound, Todwendy's voice telling Granius to wait there, and she steps through the splitting globe to stand close against me. Somehow I can *hear* the grin on her face.

"Funny sort of handle, that valve. He'll follow us in a few minutes."

"I don't see any kind of handle at all, here." She is taller than I am. I can feel the front of her leathered thigh against me. "No knocker, either."

"Give it a push."

"Seriously?"

Todwendy flits past to lay a palm on the door. I didn't notice her exert any force, but this door rotates open too, spinning on its central axis with perfect smoothness. She walks through on the right and after several seconds' pause, I pass on the left.

How convenient to be blind for the first few moments. Digesting the sound and smell of this place is much easier to do in the dark, as opposed to all once with the added input of sight. First, there's the floor, which is vibrating so hard that I can feel the bumps in the metal through my shoes. All around there are belts turning in the walls, a layered chorus of rattles, creaks, moans and other mechanical noises. Every time I turn my head, one emanation shifts in volume and space, its prominence passing on to some other sound. In a few minutes, I'll begin to discern the slow heartbeat of the place, the pattern by which the hidden steam-powered components fade into one another, with the periodic screeching of a damaged gear keeping time between cycles. This is impossible. How can it all still be running? Wasn't it all built two thousand years ago?

And then my eyes are good for the scattering of candles on the grotto floor below, the short section of light-emitting pipes on the walls. We're standing on a miniature version of the foyada bridge outside, but this one projects out into a rough cavern only to be roughly truncated by a pile of stone debris. So it's ruin after all. And the machines are still running.

Where before I was so conscious of my companion's presence, now she is gone. Todwendy has to stir from motionlessness and touch my shoulder before becoming palpable again. Steel glitters in the darkness, and she closes my fingers around the haft of the spear. Somehow it focuses my attention forward to the grey figure seated at the end of the bridge. Half illuminated by a moldering pile of trama root shavings, the sentry is wearing armor more ragged than Snowy's, a slender warhammer at his feet. The noise in here has covered up our entrance.

Stay, Todwendy communicates in that voiceless way of hers. Then she flows into a flickering grey shape, to merge with the bridge's railing and pad forward on shadowy feet. It's only two dozen paces, but she still covers the ground fast enough for me to blink in surprise. Her silhouette blends with the crouching glint of the guard, there is a click, and the tinny crunch of his breastplate hitting the stone floor. I rush forward to the edge of the bridge, anxious to distinguish Towendy's face from the lethal blur in the darkness. I know that the sound won't travel far in here, but I can still hear my feet clanking against the metal platform, while hers never did. In the orange half-light of the flameless wire-and-pipe lamps, I see her smile.

"Paralysis charm," she whispers, pulling a lacquered wooden mask from the smuggler's stony face. And Sai save us, his eyes are open, angry and terrified.

Todwendy and I peer over the railing. The floor of the cavern sits perhaps thirty feet below us, jumbled with broken-up floor tiles. A cave-in provides a ramp made of boulders, leading down to a well-lit passageway, all of metal. Someone is pacing the hall, out of sight around the corner where the footfalls make coppery echoes. In the other direction, partly beneath the entrance platform, stands a sort of tiered gallery, radiating soft, colored light. The lower levels looks a little like a Leyawiin porch done by Dwarves, with doors set into the walls and thick pillars supporting a mezzanine-like structure. Actually, the platform above is a near-replica of the platform below, open to the cavern interior and accessed by more of those bronzed doors.

And up top there, leaning back on a three-legged Dwemer stool with his feet propped up on an immense iron desk, is a third smuggler. This one's surrounded by bulging sacks and a few barrels made from that stringy, gristly wood that only comes from Vvardenfell. So if Hasphat is to be believed, that leaves nine more of these fellows, somewhere around here. Shezarr's Shit, what do you do with eleven angry cutthroats? Todwendy inspires awe and confidence only to a point. I'll just have to hope that her reaction upon hearing about the Fighters Guild drillmaster was the glimmerings of a plan.

"Can you knock them all out with that mask of yours?" This place demands more than a whisper.

"Not unless they are every one as dim as Snowy."

"Let's hope he doesn't come charging in any time soon."

"Aye. I told him to count to one thousand and come through the doors quietly. A whistle will bring him down below. That's where we're headed. Stay away from that hallway and walk towards the doors, quietly but naturally. Ready to move?"

We pick our way down the treacherous stepping-stone ramp, wary of loose pebbles and gaps between shadows. I try to walk in Todwendy's footsteps exactly, curling up my toes inside my shoes to cling to slanted rock faces. Several times I have to catch myself with the staff, and receive a sharp look as the sound reverberates around Arky's interior. The smuggler's footsteps have receded. So now there's only the man lounging on the floor above. I spot the soft glow of a Skooma pipe cradled in the fingers of his dangling left hand. That could be good or bad.

I can't help but hiss with alarm as Todwendy stands fully upright and moves towards the well-lit galley. She walks with surety, holding her midsection and chin high as if she's the smugglers' landlord. Her feet, though, flit across the floor toe-to-heel. A duchess above, a burglar below. Following her as best I can, I move with a similar lack of visual stealth, but also with the air of an adulteress on a penance march. An adulteress with a spear. Todwendy motions for me to flip it upside down. The sharp tip makes less noise on the floor, and maybe someone will mistake it for a walking stick. Staff or not, we make the lower set of doors without being challenged from above. Threading through a crowd of iron kegs, the next door (she appears to choose at random but likely does not) requires little deciphering.

Voices are immediately audible in the corridor beyond. Todwendy pauses for the time it takes to draw four long breaths and counts the different speakers up ahead, ticking them off on her fingers. And then before I can think to object, the crazy raga strides round the nearest corner into full view of a populated room. Three more men dressed in the lighter undergarments of ashlands gear, sweating in a square chamber with a grating for a floor. The orc—sitting on a miscellaneous piece of Dwemeri equipment and re-braiding his hair—glances at us as we come in. My mouth drops open as he seems to disregard us. Then the thought pushes on through his orichalcum skull, he jerks, snaps his back up for a second look—

"Where's Crito?" Todwendy's imperious voice pre-empts the uproar of our arrival. "We have business."

The room breaks into sudden motion, the two specimens in back lunging for coppery gears and heavy flagons, as they don't seem to have weapons at hand. One of them misjudges and rams his shoulder into a spinning hoop, dislodging the belt that kept the contraption running. The orc has a knife, though. A big knife.

"Shor's blood! Where the hell did you come from!"

"I told you. I have business with Crito. Where is he?"

"How did—what have you done with Dathman?"

"Your sentry? The idiot is sleeping at his post. Did you think you were the only ragpickers who know how to open the doors? Amateurs like you?" She lets the word hang in the air for a moment, daring the stock-still smugglers to mistake her identity. A fatal mistake, her eyes warned. "Now go get Crito."

"Who *are* you two bints?"

"That's for Crito to hear. I am losing patience."

The Nord on the right nods at his bruised companion, who pounds out of sight down the hall. And then a wave of his hand.

"Idhdean, go fetch Ruuz and the others from down at the observatory dig and bring them here." All together, we realize that the only path to the observatory is through Todwendy. She shakes her head in a solemn, murderous way, and the orc backs down.

Mercifully, it is only moments before feet sound on stairs and Boss Crito storms into the room. A hairless Cyrodil with deep-set eyes, he is clutching an axe with a look that says blood.

“Crito!” Once again, she seizes control of the room. “My name is Tovenda. I have a message from Orvas Dren.” The last name—familiar somehow—she pronounces with such aggressive clarity that everyone stays still, and no one speaks.

No one except Crito, that is. He marches his scowling face up to Todwendy (who doesn't even blink), halting a fingerlength from her nose.

“Dren,” he repeats with derision. “And I suppose you expect me to believe that now they let bitch raga work for the Camonna Tong?”

Thanks be to Stendarr, I somehow didn't squeal when she whipped her hand back and slapped him. It happened so fast that by the time he felt the pain, her arms were idle again at her sides, nowhere near a weapon, and the next words were already leaving her lips.

“What nonsense do you speak of? I did not name the Tong. I spoke only of my master Orvas Dren, Councilor of House Hlaalu, and do not like what I hear suggested of him.”

“You—”

“Need I remind you of the respect due to that name?” Everyone else in the room has produced weapons now, but they hold them uncertainly, and Crito takes a step back.

“And how...” She cuts him off with a clench of her raised fist.

“May I present Naleva Vahari, Matron of the Morag Tong. She has come at the courteous request of my master to officiate and notarize our dealing before the judgment of the voidwaters. Our lives are forfeit to her justice should we prove faithless.”

Matron! Of the Morag Tong? Suspicion and unease mingle in Crito's face, together forming confusion.

“Alright then, Tavenda, speak your piece. But you can tell Dren that I don't like being sent someone with no manners, and being expected to kowtow to some girl no one has ever heard of.” He squints. “Any of you lot ever heard of Tavenda?” A chorus of 'no.' “And that silent sister of yours looks like no 'agtong Matron I've ever seen.”

“If Dren had thought to negotiate trade with you,” she says softly, “he would have summoned you to a meeting with a business associate of proper station. If he sought to claim his rights from you, he would have sent delegation capable of enforcing his decision. In this case, however,” she continues, her tone disarming the tension raised by her preceding sentence, “he has sent only me, to amicably resolve a relatively minor issue. In fact, I have come to procure a single item, a trifle, really. He expects you to treat with me as a sign of your respect for him, in order to win his favor.”

“A single item.”

“Be so good as to have someone fetch the puzzle box you found, so that I know I am not wasting our time.” This gets her a curious look from Crito. “You have nowhere civilized to sit in here, so let us retire to the landing outside and discuss terms.”

She doesn't even wait for him to acquiesce, and I am by now suitably practiced in anticipating her movements that we turn in unison. Back out on the porch that opens into the main cavern, Todwendy seats herself at a (heavily pillaged) desk and awaits Crito's oncoming footsteps. A faint smile on her face and a glance at the ceiling tells me that Granius is waiting in the entranceway above.

The boss arrives with his orc and sits down on a Dwemer storage canister. I stay standing, paired with the green bodyguard.

“As you requested, the puzzle box is on its way. Why exactly you—”

“Permit me to explain,” she cuts in. “I understand that a member of the Fighters Guild attempted to purchase it recently.”

“Aye, that he did. He wouldn't offer me the courtesy of a fair price, nor the guarantees needed in such a position.”

“Your refusal has saved Dren—and myself—a good deal of trouble. Antabolis is under the command of the Balmora branch, but gets on better with the likes of the Ald-ruhn chapter. His colleagues there do not see eye-to-eye with our friend Eydis Fire-eye.”

"Not the Tong, you're from, eh?" A sarcastic, toothy grin.

"I do not know why Antabolis sought the puzzle box at the same time as my master, but it is not important. He could not be relied upon to cooperate."

The Nord reappears, and the cube trapped inside his big paw fits the description handily. Crito accepts the bauble, waves his subordinate off, then scrutinizes it.

"This ugly little thing? That's what you want? I couldn't believe it when Antabolis got so worked up over it." Todwendy shoots me an inquiring glance, and I nod in affirmation. "Say, this isn't worth thousands or anything, is it?"

"Not to you. It has no market value even to a scholar or collector, unless they are familiar with its specific purpose. It resembles a child's toy, does it not?"

Crito rests his hand on his knee and looks up, eyes full of calm and dignified avarice.

"So, Tavenda. You mentioned terms."

"Just so. For the trifle, Dren is willing to offer you three times Antabolis' price, sight unseen." Her voice is marked by boredom, at first. "Alternately, he sees this serendipitous occasion as a symbol of better things to come, and invites you to come as his guest to Ascadia. There is much to discuss concerning future transactions, larger ones that will require your specific set of skills."

"We'll take the money," Crito spits out abruptly.

Todwendy's full lips become a thin line.

"Dren instructed me to view the *gift* of the puzzle box as a sign of your respect, a guest-offering to his villa in the Isles, a down payment on your future partnership, if you will."

"Oh, we respect him, alright, but even a man of Dren's stature knows that you can't expect a man to work for you, without he sees a bit of coin first. And three times Antabolis' pitiful coinpurse is nothing to your bossman. I have need of respect too, you know."

"I certainly see the reason in your request, but my master is a proud man. I cannot guarantee that his pleasure with this transaction will survive untarnished. Additionally, my Morag Tong companion was prepared to bind our agreement in blood, and has nothing to contribute to a simple purchase of the item. You may insult her office as well."

Crito looks me in the eye.

"Your pardon, milady Nahari, I mean no offense. I never asked you to come to my place of business, nor looked for this deal, so you'll understand." Shit, I know there is something I should be doing to help here, some devastating answer that my accomplice would put through my lips if she could. "Tavenda, I need the money, unless your master can buy me half a guar caravan to move my goods off this rock."

Todwendy sighs.

"Very well, Crito. It is a disappointment for me personally, but I will not press the issue further. What did Antabolis offer?"

"Five 'undred."

Damn.

"Fifteen hundred drakes, then."

Todwendy reaches into the satchel at her side with an unconcerned manner, and then two things happen at once. Or maybe not at once. But so close on each other's heels that I never will know which came first. If I had to guess, I would say that raising her fingers to her lips and letting out an earsplitting whistle that cut through the factory noise like a thunderbolt came second. Because the other thing she did was dart her blade from its sheath and whip it through the air in a burst of orange light. And the light passed through Crito's upper thigh at fingerswidth depth, returning to lash at his hand so great red canyons opened up in his palm, and the puzzle box clattered to the floor.

Then the orc bellowed almost as loud as her whistle and lunged, but Naleva's braced spear caught him full in the chest. Her newly-sharpened blade cut through the ashproof fabric like it wasn't there, continuing on to dive into the gulf between his inflated pectoral muscles. Then both men were

shrieking and thrashing about, a cacophony of overturning barrels and mortified echoes, the two of them outdoing each other with fountains of lifesblood. Todwendy scooped up the puzzle box and drew Naleva into the shadows by the cavern walls. Four smugglers from deeper in the gallery came rushing onto the platform, weapons ready, only to see Granius' armored form charging towards them. They did not notice the sudden confusion on his face when running to meet the old brigand, and the fivesome's steely collision lay about the cavern with echoes as we passed the swirl of fighting men on our way towards the surface. Mounting the ramp, prize in hand, the rest of Arkngthand's complement emerged from their work on the lower levels, pausing to consider the fleeing women at left, and the general melee at right. Granius had summoned a skeletal minion from the aether, and now struck out at his former partners with steel and spell. Two thrusts of Naleva's bladed staff discouraged pursuit for a moment, and although a pair of crossbow bolts ripped past in the darkness, Todwendy was able to find the interior door controls. As the globe portal shut behind them and the ashstorm blew harder, they half-ran, half-slid down the massif towards the bridge, beyond which no one ventured to pursue them.

For the first few miles, with the ashstorm raging, I was almost giddy. We ran and didn't stop running, with the wind propelling us from behind and our eyes clear. On the ridge above Fort Moonmoth, the mountain wind hit the sweeter air of Odai and the Isles, funneling the blight into the air above us. Only a light dusting of ochre particles reached the ground, and Todwendy had me stop to wipe the blood from my spear. Its entire blade is shockingly red, from the tip where it was submerged, to the rivulets that collected at the hilt.

You hit him right in the heart, she says. So of course he's dead. What about Crito? Well, if they had an unusually gifted healer, they could have saved him. I expected them to help their boss rather than chase us, but I guess they didn't like him too much. If they took more than a minute killing Granius, Crito bled out in a big puddle.

Suddenly I remember it all differently. The shuddering impact running down the haft to my palms, the shrieking and roaring and grotesque death throes. Butchery she started and I finished.

You look a little green, Naleva.

I'll be fine.

You will. It will pass.

What if it doesn't?

Then if it doesn't, that means you're not a killer, honey. Plain as that.

So there's a way out of this feeling, then. I think of the orc and Crito, of everything I saw them say and do, the way they probably grew up and left their families. Why they were sitting in Arkngthand.

So I'm a killer, then.

Congratulations. It's easier to live as one than to die righteous.

Yes, I must be. Because the feeling passes fast. Quite soon after the Fort, I am left with only a great buoyant sense of victory. But by Dibella, it's the kind of victory that you feel between your legs. Before the association can even unnerve me, the heat is creeping up my neck to reach my cheeks. I think I even flared my nostrils. Bloody Bal, I'd even do a man right now! Todwendy doesn't miss a thing and laughs.

"Bless you, Naleva! You looking at me like that, it's the first time I thought you might decide to up and pounce." I look away. "Don't be ashamed. It can happen after your life comes down to a throw of the dice, especially when you fight and roll sixes."

"Dice, eh? Let me see that puzzle box. Looks like a big copper die itself." She is still cradling it in her fingers, and smiles coyly at my request.

"In a moment, dear. But first tell me I'm not your first flame. Wouldn't want to torment you so,

if it's just after some awakening you've had.”

She has some ego, this one. I shake my head, all ready to retreat from the probe, but actually, I'm not feeling bashful in the least.

“So you've always been of this persuasion then?” she continues, tossing Antabolis' bauble from one hand to the other.

“Well, no, not always. As a girl I used to take the waterfront boys back to the garden granary loft, like we all did, sometimes. Just for the thrill of it.” How is she making me *say* this?

“What a little Dunmer you were! And then I suppose you wondered why everyone raved about those five minutes of grunting and pumping?” Todwendy titters. “I can empathize.”

Fair enough, I suppose. But *gods*, how I'd like to lay her out across the rock and—

“Fear not, Naleva. Just keep a bit of that fire in your belly and you will be as deadly with your charms as you are with that spear. I can tell.”

“My spear?”

“Aye, your sticking staff. You moved almost as fast as I did, and didn't hesitate. Good instincts. If you can recall some of that childhood skill, you won't need my help at all.”

“Except to walk and talk. Mephala's daughter, you were in there. Who is this Dren fellow, anyways?” She proffers the puzzle box, as if to signify that we can talk about something other than my tastes in lechery.

“You already know as much as most. He's one of House Hlaalu's more powerful councilors, a right conservative old bastard in a forward-looking organization. But he also lacks a conscience, by all reports, and doesn't let his hostility to non-Dunmer get in the way of business. He owns half the Camonna Tong outright, you understand. And I may not be quite as accomplished a liar as you suppose. Crito wasn't going to part with that bloody little souvenir unless he made a tidy profit, Dren or no.”

“Not Mephala's daughter, then. A distant niece.”

“Well, I satisfy the sex and murder requirement. The other thing about the Tong is that they are well on their way to having the Fighters Guild in pocket. They own the Balmora chapter for sure.”

“And do you have any idea what this thing is for?” I squint at the puzzle box and use my nail to scratch grime from the grooves on its face.

“What, Antabolis didn't tell you? I have no idea. Been here for a month, but I never did have occasion to set foot in a Dwarven ruin.”

“And you just decided to risk your life in one on a lark? We met yesterday, you'll recall.”

“Well, Chuna will be tickled pink to hear the story, and I'll make him accept it in lieu of a small debt. That way he won't drink it away.”

Oh, amiable lies. Still, I sense that she doesn't want to explain her motive, rather than having a hidden one.

“I see. I'd thank you, but—”

“The entertainment of your company has been payment enough, yes.”

“Where did you get that mask?”

“Well, that's not important. It is a cunning little accessory, is it not? I'll wager that sentry is just now regaining the use of his limbs.”

“Could I see it?”

“Naturally. Just don't, well, put in on, though I suppose that's superfluous to say.”

It really is a thing of beauty, formed from delicate tropical wood and covered in maroon-and-black geometric patterns that can only be from Hammerfell. My finger pulses as I pick the mask, and I can feel it throb as I gingerly turn it over and over. Todwendy watches my face closely.

“A finely-crafted enchantment, done with an artisan's taste. You look transfixed, Naleva.”

This is, in fact, my one magical talent. I could have told her of this artifact's purpose without being informed. In moments, the contours and moods of the magicka contained here dance behind my

mind's eyes. For the glimmerings of an instant, the mask winks at me with the swarthy face of its creator, black eyes going deeper and deeper...

"Todwendy." My voice turns sharp. "Be careful how you use this thing. It's not just immobilizing, not if you trigger it with the proper..."

What lies beneath here?

"Naleva, what are you going on abo—"

I collapse, a wave of green debility disassociating bone from muscle. The ground comes up hard, and I feel volcanic crystals implant themselves in my cheek and jaw.

"Naleva!" She snatches the mask from my limp hand and helps me to my feet. "Is this a joke? You've cut your cheek." Her hand is tender in the oozing blood. "This ought to raise quite a bruise, too."

"I—I set off the enchantment."

"From just holding it? Impossible. You have to wear it."

"So you say, Tavenda. But I sure as hell didn't just faint from nerves!"

She draws back to look at me, as if reappraising.

"Well then. I knew you were hiding some sort of brilliance behind those speckly red eyes of yours."

"Don't exaggerate."

"I never exaggerate."

She keeps pulling out the mask as we continue, scrutinizing it the whole way back to Balmora.

This time no one challenges my entry into the guildhall. Maybe it's the weapon in my hand, or possibly just the new self-assurance of my gait, but either way I find Hasphat in that same overheated cellar, eating his evening meal with half a dozen colleagues. A meaningful glance at the drillmaster and he breaks off from the table with his plate, leading me into a side room. In a few minutes, a pint-sized orc brings me a duplicate of Antabolis' meal, complete with a tankard of Riften mead.

"I did not expect you back so soon." His eyes are on the puzzle box. "Caius usually prefers to err on the side of preparation."

"There was at least an hour of that, but I thought it best not to wait. Here is your trinket. If the guild intends to go in after the rest, I'd suggest pushing up it up in the calendar. Things at Arkngthand were left in a certain state of disarray."

A shadow of something like dismay passes across his face. Considering Todwendy's mention of Eydis Fire-eye, could the guild have been planning to let the smugglers alone? Or profit from them in other ways?

"I shall take that under advisement." No curiosity as to the death toll, then. He accepts the puzzle box and favors it with an unobtrusive caress. "With your exceedingly prompt return, I have not had the time to prepare the promised dossier. In three days' time I would..."

A stern look for our Nibenese friend.

"...or alternately, I have time tonight to answer your verbal questions. If you can guarantee their safety, I will also lend you my research notes and bibliography for Caius to copy. But only if I have them back within those same three days."

"That would be ideal."

He stands to retrieve papers from a gnarled cabinet. There's a hammock rolled up in the corner, too. He must be a real Corrup swamp-sweater to sleep in this heat. My prize is a rather thin stack of papers, their corners brown and curling. Antabolis takes a charcoal pencil and scribbles a series of barely-legible phrases on the cover sheet.

"There, those are some useful titles for the layman. If the bookseller across the way doesn't

have them, Jobasha in Vivec will.” I reach for the documents, but he places his splayed palm across them. “I do need your solemn promise that these won't get dropped in the Odai by accident, nor spirited off to Cyrodiil as evidence.”

I wrinkle my nose at him.

“They are safe with me.”

“Aye, under the protection of the Imperial crown, I suppose.” His tone is wry. “Quite an honor, I suppose. But to business. What specifically does Caius wish to know about the Sixth House?”

“In truth, he made no indication that he knows anything at all as of yet. And I think he meant for me to study the subject as well. I imagine your notes assume a certain base level of knowledge?”

He looks into his drink with traces of annoyance.

“In that case, I scarcely know where to begin.”

“Isn't there a beginning?”

“Always. But that's a terribly dangerous question to ask a student of history.”

“Start anywhere, then. How is the Sixth House a cult? Are they like the missionaries, the Imperial Cult?”

Antabolis guffaws, half drillmaster, half genteel.

“Yes, I suppose they do 'missionary' work. But the Sixth House is not only outlawed by Temple and Empire alike, it is completely outside society, and largely hostile to it.”

“There are five Dunmer houses...”

“Very astute. The Sixth House is the resurrection of House Dagoth, which betrayed the Velothi cause during the War of the First Council, and fought for the Dwemer and their Nordic allies.”

“This is where I start reading, yes?”

“Just so. But we don't need to go too deep into it for our purposes. After the decline from the golden age of so-called Velothi High Culture, the Chimer reorganized into the Six Great Houses, marginalizing the ancestors of today's ashlanders. About thirty-centuries ago, then, the warlord Indoril Nerevar united all the Chimer, as nominal king of the First Council of the Six Houses and nomads. He made a temporary peace with the Dwemer, which leads to confusing references to a House Dwemer.” I can sense his facts getting more inclusive.

“And then war?”

“Yes. The truce broke down, Dagoth sided with the Dwemer, both were destroyed, Nerevar died, and the Tribunal ruled the new Dunmeri state.”

“Cosades also instructed me to investigate the Nerevarine Cult.”

“I know little about that. Nerevar remains a saint of the Tribunal Temple, but his cult is outlawed, dedicated to prophecies of his reincarnation. It's primarily the ashlanders who believe in his eventual return. He is supposed to drive out the outlanders and the Empire, and rescue the tribes from their slow death in the desert that Great House landgrabs and Imperial economic interests have doomed them to.”

“But the Sixth House was destroyed millennia ago.”

“The political organization, yes. But its patriarch Voryn Dagoth lives on to this day. Every religion needs a nemesis. The Altmer with their devil Lorkhan, the Nords with Alduin. Perhaps the Empire rules the world because we have dispensed with the distractions of spiritual foes, and can reconcile all peoples to our rule.”

Get back on topic there, Hasphat.

“So Dagoth is some sort of...”

“The Tribunal have lived as god-kings since the Battle of Red Mountain, and so has Dagoth Ur. Or so they say. The Ghostfence was built for a reason.”

“Blight and corpus.”

“Blight is carried on the wind, so the purpose is moreso the carriers of those diseases. And despite what the Empire's reassuring reports say, those carriers aren't just beasts like kagouti and

cliffracers. Dagoth Ur, unlike the Tribunal, shares his immortality with his lieutenants. Through their efforts, the Sixth House waxes and wanes. Small wars have been fought over this ever since the Battle of Red Mountain.”

“I never heard of any of this.”

“Vvardenfell is a secretive place. Look at what I made you do just to hear this.”

“Not very patriotic of you, was it?” Apparently I work for the Emperor now.

“And the province has been rather quiet since the Armistice. With the Morag Tong to manage House Wars, there's no need nor room for feudal or city-state struggles as in High Rock. The opening of the island for Imperials and Great House settlement was what provoked all this activity. In recent years, the Sixth House has gone beyond mere threatening noises in their volcano to begin making inroads with the Tribunal's followers. Now it truly is a cult, maintained by some esoteric power of Dagoth's, and responsible for increasingly frequent attacks on outlanders. That last is my most important conclusion thus far.”

“I heard speculation about those attacks. Someone just hit Gnisis.” Of course Todwendy has the right of it, too.

“No doubt. The Sixth House's servants slaughter foreigners for no apparent purpose, while the authorities do their best to cover it all up and prevent tensions from rising. Meanwhile, rural areas are pressed harder than ever by the blight, and the Temple is getting more orthodox and repressive as it sees its grip on the faithful loosen.”

Mead is a lot stronger than Mazte, and while Antabolis remains decorous, he is getting more talkative.

“That's a grimmer picture than I expected.” I drain my cup. “Sounds like the Empire needs to deal with things soon, if they like their ebony flowing. Maybe send some bright-eyed young fellow from Sutch to blow out all the cobwebs on this island.”

“Ha! Wouldn't that please your employer. Caius says he's fed up with heroes. That the Empire keeps sending them out here to the provinces to 'civilize' things. That the fools don't seem to realize that their 'destinies' are being created by historical processes. They're too ignorant and impatient to understand that the Empire's very presence drives the rise of the Sixth House, and the debasement of the economy in the countryside, and the decline of the Temple, and all the other interrelated glacial tragedies. A decent argument, that last part.” The diners in the main room have dispersed, leaving us alone in the dark and quiet. “And so Caius sends you to me, hoping you'll be different. Poor Caius. So many disappointments.”

“The Empire must be *trying* to disappoint him, sending me to work for him an all.” Antabolis seems not to hear.

“Caius and I always argue over the role of the individual in history. Is the individual shaped and controlled by history? Or can an exceptional individual shape history? Are individuals carried in the stream? Or do they dam and divert the flow? I say Tiber Septim changed the world. Caius says that Tiber Septim was a product of his time, and if he hadn't lived, some other person would have served his function.”

“I've never had any quarrel with the flow, myself.”

“And neither do the Dunmer. The Sixth House speaks to something deep in their psyche, and what the Empire has wrought on this province will bring it to the surface. We've churned up all the rot their culture has to offer, and some devil under a mountain will take payment for our misdeeds.”

Maybe 'talkative' is too cautious a word for his level of sobriety.

“When you read my notes, Naleva—you see, when we *understand* the events that move us, the events become history. History is understanding.” I nod sagely, gathering his notes to leave. “Otherwise we're all just dumb animals trying to get in out of the cold.”

His fighting cellar is never cold. I leave him with his puzzle box, on my way to the Lucky Lockup and fitful dreams of Todwendy.

I did dream of Todwendy, stirring towards consciousness as the tingling heat faded slowly away. But as I wiped the cloying sweat from my thighs, her image slurred into the waking dream that came next. I plunged my head into the mattress to bury it in true sleep, where it belonged, and the visitation followed me there. An impossibly tall frame of dark flesh hardened to muscle and sinew, topped by a golden mask haloed in obscuring light. The voice from above is warm and silky as we walk through a wedding procession of the dead, and my companion greets each of them in a light-hearted way, shutting me out of his one-sided exchanges. The blanket has moved to strangle me when I wake, bunched up around my waist and legs like Telvanni armor.

Upon finding the Lucky Lockup strangely dark and nearly empty the night before, I had delivered Antabolis' documents to Caius, leaving him the night to digest them. My dream woke me before any of the other guests, so I set out early for the bed-and-basket.

"This is good work, Naleva. Antabolis sent you an unenviable task, going to Arkngthand, and your success is very encouraging." Caius is shirtless and sugar-ragged again. Also, I never mentioned the ruins to him. "I do need to know the identity of that Redguard you set out with, however."

"Just a friend. Todwendy, although I've heard her give two other names before." Please don't let this be an issue. Or even a topic of conversation.

"A few days here and you've made friends already? What is her affiliation?"

"Lately a contractor for House Hlaalu, but now a free agent. She is on her way out of the province, and also owed a favor to Antabolis." I meet his gaze at that, inwardly anxious to see how my skills have progressed. It's not the creation of the lie that tests you; it's the nerves needed to maintain it. Maybe Caius was a foolish choice of target for such—

"Very well, so long as you were discreet. Naleva, you have proven yourself willing and able to act on my orders, so I will continue the explanation I gave earlier. I mentioned—in a moment of weakness—the Emperor, because the Emperor is my *direct* superior." Jewels o' Julianos, what a thing to say. "True, the Blades have their Grandmaster, but Uriel Septim is sufficiently concerned over the state of this island that he has split the Vvardenfell station off from provincial command. I now run the Blades' spy network here independently, and you are my personal charge."

"And is the Empire so short on snoops that they conscript them now? Hire them without bothering to say as much?"

"No, not generally." His docility before my prying speaks to the absurdity of the situation. "So far as I'm concerned, your purpose here has yet to be determined. In the meantime, you will have to accept what information I see fit to share. I understand that you have no prospects back in Cyrodiil and urge to you to continue in my service. I cannot answer for what happens to you otherwise." So he has my best interests in mind, combined with a bland indifference to my fate. The Blades. Scuttling Hell! That will take more time to chew over than Caius is likely to give me.

"Now that you are a novice in the Blades, and not just an informer, you may avail yourself of our information and service network. You can find safehouses across Vvardenfell, sources of news and, if you ask courteously, training. You may refer to a list of operatives that I keep with me, although obviously you cannot carry one around. If you visited Arille's Tradehouse after disembarking at Seyda Neen, you may have talked to Elone, the publican. She's my gatekeeper, although she never saw you coming, bureaucratic fiasco that that was."

"Don't I have to take an oath, or something?"

"I thought we might dispense with that, for now, since you won't be in any position to harm the Emperor. And I need you to fit into this province better than a native. You could have occasion to break any oath you make. Do we still see eye-to-eye?"

"Yes."

“Then take another two hundred septims, so you don't have to choose between poverty and progress. And hop on over to the Mages in town and get Sharn gra-Muzgob to fill in the gaps on the Nerevarine Cult.”

“That name one more time?”

“Just ask for Sharn. She's smart, for an orc. You'll like the irritable old bat. She's always worried that the Temple will bust in and stick her in a fire. And worried with good reason. You can buy her trust with the skull in that bag on the table.”

“A skull?”

“Don't be squeamish. It's long-dead. Or at least not too fresh. You can tell Sharn that I appreciate her cooperation immensely, and can guarantee her physical safety from the Temple, should she find herself exposed. Provided, of course...”

“Of course.”

Sharn proves to synthesize peevishness and paranoia in novel, wholly unendearing ways. After some transparent hedging over the purpose of my visit, she accepts Caius' gift.

“You want to know about Nerevar? What a tuskache, that one! I only started studying him because he exemplifies the Temple's backwardness, not that certain cassock-stains back in Cyrodiil aren't far behind.”

“I'm not sure I follow, gra-Muzgob.”

“You know they turned Nerevar into a bonewalker? Their sainted king, a shambling husk in a tomb. Yet somehow the intricacies of life and the ethical pursuit of knowledge is an abomination whose practitioners must be killed. This here item shouldn't have come from a man like Cosades; it should be sold in the marketplace.”

“No doubt. But in the meantime, you will honor his request for a dossier on the Nerevarine Cult?”

“Yes, yes, in a day or so. But if he is asking after Peakstar, you can tell him I know the same as he does.”

“What is Peak Star?”

She raises a wiry eyebrow.

“Not a what. Peakstar is the latest of the False Incarnates, and the announcement of her death by the Ordinators has been a topic of debate these past days. The Temple hasn't produced a body. She may have died in prison, or she may still be alive somewhere, given her propensity to disappear and reemerge.”

“I see. Cosades will gladly accept a dossier when you have it prepared, but for my own purposes...” I trail off in hesitation. “What's a False Incarnate?”

Sharn takes the illicit skull in one ponderous green hand and holds it up to her face, examining.

“An ashlander, usually. One who claims to be Nerevar Reborn, in fulfillment of the prophecies. They're the reason for the Temple's persecution of the cult, because the reborn Nerevarine is supposed to overthrow the Tribunal as false gods, and restore the land to its roots in Resdayn and Veloth. It's bad news for the Great Houses too, and the Empire was only too happy to join in the prohibition, what with the stipulations concerning outlanders.”

“So the Temple goes after the False Incarnates?”

“In a sly, merciful sort of way. Priests can be subversives, but Nerevarine pretenders are supposed to just be insane. So eventually the incarnates die chasing their prophecies or get stuck in a deep dark Indoril hole for the rest of their lives. Somewhat odd to have Nerevar's house imprisoning its own, don't you think? But if the cult has any purchase among the settled Dunmer, they keep it real quiet.”

“So who was Peakstar?”

“A girl child who washed up on some ashland shore to be adopted by one tribe or another. She went into hiding for long periods, as the Temple has stepped up its repression every year for quite some time now. Persecution is mostly confined to the ranks of the faithful, and moreso the clergy itself, but the Nerevarine Cult is the lone exception. When the prophecies are so vague, any number of threatening figures could claim the title, and possibly an ashlander army.”

“Will you include the prophecies in the dossier?”

“Would that I could. ashlander wise women interpret dreams and prophecies the way we interpret texts, and never write anything down. Most of the prophecies were lost when the oral chain broke down, although sometimes I wonder whether some of them were deliberately forgotten.”

“How can they claim to adhere to prophecies that don't exist anymore?”

“They may exist somewhere, recorded by some Temple heretic, Telvanni scholar, or jealously guarded by a secretive mabrigash. Their rediscovery is a tantalizing thought.” She tucks the skull into a small footlocker. “The False Incarnates all utilize the one prophecy that is common knowledge, however. The Stranger.”

She recited it for me then and there, wrapping her orcish tongue around the words with a certain relish. I'll put it down here without comment, except to say that I found some of it inexplicably familiar. When I read it, I still hear a drum beating slow time, somewhere far off.

When earth is sundered, and skies choked black,

And sleepers serve the seven curses,

To the hearth there comes a stranger,

Journeyed far 'neath moon and star.

Though stark-born to sire uncertain

His aspect marks his certain fate.

Wicked stalk him, righteous curse him.

Prophets speak, but all deny.

Many trials make manifest

The stranger's fate, the curses' bane.

Many touchstones try the stranger

Many fall, but one remains.

Let me answer one bit of verse with another, although I did not come across this other until a good deal afterward. When I read it, I instantly knew it to be the truth. The words transported me back to those moments when I first entered Vivec, on a mission from Caius Cosades. And yet they also speak to the nature of all cities, reminding me strongly of home, as my home is the truest city that exists. Now the shifting smells and wafting emotions of Nibennium and the Thief's city are hopelessly tangled in my mind. The former, with its white buildings emerging from the lake, and the latter, with its dusky cantons floating in the sea. Is it Vvardenfell imposing itself on my birthplace, a headstrong eastern conqueror? Or is it a piece of home extended to Vvardenfell as a gift, here to take root and flourish as a comforting transplantation. Either way, here is what Vivec has to say about his city:

'This is God's city, different from others. Cities from foreign countries put their denizens to sleep and walk to the star-wounded East to pay homage to me. The capital of the northern men, crusty with eon's ice, bows before Vivec the city, me it together.

'Self-thought streets rush through tunnel blood. I have rebuilt myself. Hyper eyed signposts along my traffic arm, soon to be an inner sea. My body is crawling with all gathered to see me rising up like a monolithic instrument of pleasure. My spine is the main road to the city that I am. Countless transactions are taking place in veins and catwalks and the roaming, roaming, roaming, as they roam over and through and add to me. There are temples erected along the hollow of my skull and I will ever wear them as a crown. Walk across the lips of God.

'They add new doors to me and I become effortlessly trans-immortal with the comings and goings and the stride-heat of the market where I am traded for, yell of the children hear them play, scoffed at, amused, desired, paid for in native coin, new minted with my face on one side and my city-body on the other. I stare with each new window. Soon I am a million-eyed insect dreaming.

'Red-sparking war trumpets sound like cattle in the ribcage of shuffling transit. The heretics are destroyed on the plaza knees. I flood over into the hills, houses rising like a rash, and I never scratch.

'I raise lanterns to light my hollows, lend wax to the thousands the candlesticks that bear my name again and again, the name innumerable, shutting in, mantra and priest, god-city, filling every corner with the naming name, wheeled, circling, running river language giggling with footfalls mating, selling, stealing, searching, and worry not ye who walk with me.'

His boasting is unwarranted in one respect. Foreign cities, even those worthy of legs, do not come here to pay homage. Vivec is not renowned outside Morrowind, and is even looked down upon in Mournhold. They do not speak of its glories in far-off lands, and we from Cyrodiil are likely as not to curl our lips in condescension. Even true-eyed travelers, once back in more familiar settings, will not sing its praises. Rather than hopelessly attempting to convey sentiments that are not welcome, they will simply offer a wan smile. 'A queer old settelement, that. And its denizens are queerer still.'

But they know.

Alike as I, they know. We also know that the task of description is impossible, but I'm no ordinary mortal, so here goes.

It begins in the line of snorting, stamping guar. Tossing their piled burdens to and fro, cursed by their handlers, the caravan beasts feel the stirrings of the pilgrims. The transient faithful have more eagerness even than the tattered blight refugees, who are jaded, or the Ordinators patrolmen, who exhibit no signs of sentience. So it is the pilgrims who feel it rising from the Ascadian mists, their destination drawing nearer at hand as the netch (and the hazard of attack by one of the females) thin out overhead. The road becomes straighter, growing firm underfoot. Then, just when anticipation has begun to fray at the edges from uncertainty's sabotage, the way sprouts flagstones beneath you. The road is paved now, and seconds later, Vivec announces itself.

Initially, of course, it's the Foreign Quarter, looming overhead with its tiers and buttresses and happy lanterns, taller than Telvanni towers and Imperial fortresses. Outlanders are no longer legally confined to its riotous bulk, but the city with all its games and workings remains rigged against the non-Dunmer. Interlopers tend to stick to the Hlaalu canton for business, the Arena for pleasure, and otherwise eschew the Dunmeri depths of extortionary shopkeepers, unfriendly cornerclubs, and now the odd Sixth House butcher.

But forget the Foreign Quarter. I am farther ahead of myself than a Colovian youth with his first sheep. Ludicrous to posit that the city should uncloak itself piece by piece, unfolding before you in any logical, linear fashion. No, Vivec hits you full in the face, pouncing down all at once so before you know to come up for air, it's buried in you up to the hilt. No sooner than you see the bridge, and the first canton's facade, then you are in deep, time and memory and sensation bleeding together so that you never cross the city's threshold. That moment is lost, transporting you immediately to the center of enthrallment. Retrospectively, the Foreign Quarter offers a brief oasis of calm (or at least a more familiar, Western sort of urban chaos), but the first glance towards the forest of seaborne cantons to the south wipes all comfort away. Vivec now has you.

A tumult of banners, purple and crusty red, hung from rib bone sky-bridges and emblazoned with skeletal saints in garish black. The air is crushing, an unrelenting onslaught of gongs and discordant trumpets that in time prove to emanate from your own head. The air is steam, rising from the dazzling canyon between cantons that is the main thoroughfare. It is all instantly too much, certainly too much to write in order. The way the sea reeks but cannot penetrate into your overloaded senses, the canal impossibly clogged with a bloodstream of gondolas, skiffs, swimmers, reed-rafts, driftwood, silt striders, itself merely the living lagoon hemmed in by the cantons that surely must be floating there in place around it. The entire city, swirling with sound, is suffused with that water, pumping by God's will through every inch of it, streaming from the canton's base (is this the source of the sound that is so arresting?) in torrents. The city steams with it, and the cookfires, and the rising dust, and the incense, and the music, and the cavorting ghosts, and the ash of roads two hundred miles away.

A millennial butch netch—strider-sized, hung with banners and baskets and saddles—swings past, its soulfire lanterns blinking faith and revelry at you. Passing by your waistworks ledge, the floating vessel makes for High Fane and brushes through a tapestry to the Mother, showering the walkways below with ingrained ash. You realize that the city not only *is* life, but it hosts life in incalculable abundance. Sentience is everywhere, bipedal and teeming, on second glance independent from the towering bone metropolis that holds it above the waters. Mortals crowd the streets, packed as they are into narrow ribbons by water and hard, vertical earth. What are the cantons made of? Something too monolithic and imperishable to be altered, surely. Why else should the inhabitants stand for such congestion? That is why timber scaffolding grows below the waistworks like scrawny vines and lichens, climbing up the slanted sides towards the plaza domes. The canals are made narrower the same way, as each canton grows skirts of docks, marriage beds where the gondolas mate with the city and allow it to carry on. The cantons are not inviolable after all. Look how the tiny people burrow in their sides, excavating new homes in the earthy flesh of their god.

The roads are too much. Even the wide thoroughfares, mere boatlengths above water-level, keep pinning you to the walls, bending you over the railing to stare down at the rushing water traffic. Yes, better to travel down there, below the streets and away from these pacing Ordinator statues, hawking merchants, wall-scaling children, shuffling slaves, levitating Armigers, rattling handcars, delirious pilgrims, holy whores. The tumult down in the lagoon is worse, if anything, but at least there half the chaos is hidden out of sight above, and your fate is not your own. A boatman will control your movements for a few coins, relieving you from the exhausting burden of self-preservation.

In a brief lucid moment, your rational mind notes that House Hlaalu, ever saavy and ascendant, has much cheaper fares funneling traffic to its own canton. Redoran and Telvanni stand apart from all this life, the former cut off by the insatiable Arena, the latter isolated by choice. But was not your business in the Foreign Quarter? Silly outlander. Your gondola heads back at the brink of St. Delyn and St. Olms, cantons sporting the largest dome-statues of any other in their industrious, grit-covered humility. It looks as if the crowding only gets worse with every step south, at least until the glimpsed serenity of Vivec's Temple, and the great body of stone hanging above it, circled with scaffolding. In the distance there is the warrior-poet's stepped puzzle pyramid streaming water, and the brazen violation of Ebonheart beyond it, now fueling half the city with its harbor of oceangoing ships, even as

it drains the island of Scarab's blood and miner's sweat.

Heading north again, you see that the quest for space could not be satisfied by creaky wooden additions to the cantons themselves. On the shore where the outermost flanks of the city almost kiss the Ascadian grass, stone ledges have risen. Wharves and terraces play host to newer houses on space reclaimed from the sea. Vvardenfell makes itself felt there, for I see mudbrick compound walls embracing Redoran shell architecture and Hlaalu roof gardens. In the haze, it is hard to see how far Vivec stretches inland. By some law or unspoken agreement, none of the additions come near the main approach to the Foreign Quarter, except for the shanty town around the small port at the northeast. No law or divine force can keep a sailor from his brothels, and though this city may give a CiCi pause (there, I admit it), it is not omnipotent.

We dock beneath the north face of the canton, providing the first moment of solace from this mental din. I pause on the rope-bridge gangway, looking out over the narrow strip of water that separates the City of Swords from the Ascadian mainland. Everything under that dim ridgeline horizon is Vvardenfell's breadbasket, with every green crop known to Morrowind flourishing in the dark volcanic tefra. Legions of beastfolk slaves tend it all, their presence rankling most every outlander with a conscience, exposing the Empire's legalistic custodians for the bazaar cutthroats they really are. At the same time, every pair of clawed or scaled hands in manacles is balm for the offended sensibilities of Dunmer traditionalists, an assurance that Dres and Indoril will keep the peace. I prefer to devote my attention to the netch instead, great amiable bags of noxious purple gas that offered great entertainment on the strider ride south. The males are peaceful, dumb enough to mistake you for a small shrub and caress you with their tentacles. A swift swat will do for that behavior, although trying it with a betty netch will get you maimed, strangled and then drowned.

Up to the Foreign Quarter. I pick my moment and dart through the hordes of pack guar, gaining the ramp up to the waistworks. Each canton was built (if they were ever *built*) with plenty of wasted space, and the slanting passageway has doors set awkwardly into the walls near the halfway point, where someone has found room for a modest (albeit lightless) dwelling. The waistworks aren't exactly sunswept either, part of the reason that the exterior is so frenzied. Every outlander organization with any sway has been begging to drill windows or light holes in the walls for years now. Not a chance. The mercurial Dunmer may prize the Mephalian aspects of their society, but some laws were not meant to be broken. Every true Velothi knows that the mountain's moods may shift and the ash may come again. The city's leadership will not tolerate even this den of faithless outlanders becoming exposed.

I should mention why I'm here. Much as Cosades appreciated my findings in Balmora, he pulled two more names from his Blades' bag of wagging tongues and sent me to arrange meetings. It's the Nerevarine and Sixth House cults again, presumably in the hopes that new informants will offer new information. The first is a Khajiit with an unpronounceable name and underworld connections. There is no surefire way of finding her, so I'll leave that for later. The second is a librarian in the Temple archives, and asking her about the Nerevarine will be sticking my head in the tiger's mouth. Best to start with a contact mentioned on the last page of Antabolis' dossier, a helpful suggestion for a source on the Nerevar worship among the ashlanders. With the initial shock of Vivec wearing off, I find his Black Shalk Cornerclub hangout in minutes.

It may be the Foreign Quarter, but this place feels native. Much moreso than the South Wall or Lucky Lockup, although not nearly as hostile as the Council Club Tong nest. It is a little tense in here, and it can't be explained by the usual mid afternoon stillness of a half-empty bar. The place wraps around the staircase into a dim little alcove. By the lit tallow candle I see an Argonian, seated in that particular way of the tailed and bow-legged. There's a cup of Sujamma that might well have seen yesterday, and a hauberk of intricate green scalemail on a bench in the corner. I think I've seen its like on a Nibenese flotilla guard.

"Excuse my boldness..." Not even a hint of reaction for two heartbeats, and then Huleeya of the Morag Tong swivels his head towards me, a deliberate, measured movement. "...but are you Huleeya?"

"Yes. Much good may it do you. I am preoccupied by my own affairs." He looks away.

"I am Naleva of Polefel." He can't stop me taking a seat, anyway. "Are you waiting to meet someone, or are your affairs of the contemplative, alcoholic sort?"

"Truthfully, Naleva, I have an appointment at the establishment of a friend. Why have you sought me out; I do not know you."

Is Cosades' name worth anything here? Better to leave that out.

"I was directed to you by a friend."

"And which friend was this?"

"Hasphat Antabolis." If he has heard the name, he will remember it, striking specimen that it is.

"Ah, the fighting gentlemen. We never did begin correspondence, although he solicited me for information." Eye contact now, reassessment by a glimmering reptilian void. Will he take me for a sellsword? The staff sits propped against Caius' east wall; the blade at my belt. "Truthfully, Naleva, these troublesome fools stand in the way of my chosen errand this day."

He gestures with the horn at the end of his snout, as effective as a pointing finger. So that's why the bar is so tense. Three Mazte-brave Dunmer are waiting at a single small table by the door, bombarding the alcove with dark glances.

"The three on the end?"

"I doubt they will let me leave unharmed. Or if so, they may mean to follow me out." Only one of the three looks like a fighter, and none are armed any more heavily than I am. "They act on no one's orders, and have no intention to rob."

"They don't like the sight of a free Argonian, then?"

"Verily."

"How long have they had you hemmed in here?"

"No longer than my drink has lasted. There is little honor in self-defense, Naleva, and I do not wish to trouble my friend Saralis by fighting in his club. I would be happy to speak with you at Jobasha's bookstore, were you to dissuade these irksome fellows. Otherwise there must be violence."

"Allow me to try, and I will see you to this Jobasha." A curt nod of acknowledgment, betraying neither gratitude nor skepticism.

Well, then. How best to approach this? None of the three is attractive enough (although that's can be a hard judgment to make with Vvardenfell men) to make a feminine sort of distraction credible. But do any of them look conceited enough to be fooled by it? The two with the tough, badlands haircuts appear to be lackeys, in fact, and their traveling clothes double as armor. Two ideas, then, for an assault on the immaculately-dressed man in charge.

I swagger over to their table, no point playing any character other than the ones I look like.

"Lizards these days! You lads'll want to hear this one, by Azura!" I plop down at their table as unstopably as Todwendy and motion at the barman for four drinks. "I was just over there in the corner looking to fill some positions and would you know it, I found an Argonian what doesn't want to pull weeds! And I thought we had an economy 'round here! The Three only know what his type is doing to support himself without a rice paddy 'unner him." Too late I realize that my whole bearing reeks of Cyrodiil. Even my accent has plunged deep down into Polefel, as if I was six years old again. It can't fail to offend this lot. True enough, the drinks are too slow in coming and I receive only a contemptuous glare.

"Who asked you here, half-caste? Even if some eggfarmer slob did your mother an honor, she wasn't supposed to keep the brat. I thought even outlanders had shame."

Ouch. There's no way laugh that one off believably. But too late, I'm already making friends as if the words never crossed his lips.

"Just lost a bit of color under the setting sun is all, you know?" Mazte. Thank Sanguine. "You boys don't look too black about the jowls yourself." A desperate titter. "Say, I think that lizard over there is on his way out, and this may soon be a decent public house after all, not a Westerner in sight."

“Except you.” No mistaking that tone.

“I’ve been off the island a spell, I’ll admit, but what say we all have a drink together while the swamprot airs out.” This isn’t working. My bigot’s credentials aren’t passing muster and what’s more, Huleeya hasn’t budged. I pull out my coinpurse, heavy with Caius’ allowance. “Or if you’re not in the drinking mood, come see my master and he’ll put a couple of these in your pocket.” Big mistake.

“You think to insult the Hlaalu with your scrapings?” the bossman roars. I hear Huleeya’s chair scraping on the floor.

Looks like we have to do this now. I let the purse slip through my fingers, catching it by the trailing drawstring to whip around and slam a pound of coins into a livid Dunmeri jaw. At the same time, I’m across the table with my left hand to grab the bossman by his mane and yank him face first into a mug of Mazte. Potsherds scatter in all directions, and I kick away from the table, overturning it. Huleeya comes down on the third thug from somewhere in the vicinity of the ceiling, tail and claws thrashing. The next few instants are *knee*, *pommel* and *chair*; then pommel again to lay two of them out on the floor, groaning and curling.

Huleeya draws his knife, but only to cut away a coinpurse and toss it to the stunned bartender. Our three victims are all bleeding slightly, none of them wounded by any real weapon. Todwendy was right. Good instincts. Huleeya regains his initiative long before me, and leads the way out into the waistworks.

Here we teach you to spar, Gallenus’ hired drillmaster said. *So that perhaps one day you have the beginnings of the notion to defend yourself*. I clutched my staff with pride, the victor at sunset of the last day. *But I do not teach you to fight, make no mistake. To fight as the warrior fights, is nine parts out of ten mere impulse. The will to inflict harm without hesitation or remorse, coupled with training, makes a warrior. Today I teach you to spar, but in a fight between commoners it is the will to violence that prevails, not size, not speed, nor always even skill. Remember that.*

Fighting is impulse, and I think my ‘impulse’ just impressed an agent of the Morag Tong. (Hopefully he never finds out that I impersonated one recently, or my impulse will have to fall victim to his expertise.)

Mercifully, Jobasha’s Bookstore is just across the waistworks, leaving no time for the commotion in the Black Shalk to attract a crowd. My relief fades somewhat as we storm into the hallway of dust and bookish quiet only to come fact-to-face with a seated Ordinator, his gold mask perpetually scowling. Huleeya seems to have expected it, however, and carries on down the cramped corridor unphased. This place looks like more books than I have seen in my life, probably because the premises are so small. Even the precise assassin before me is in danger of upsetting something with a swing of his tail. The tomes become sumptuous as we descend, finishing in a square little room that doubles as Jobasha’s sleeping quarters. Huleeya nods to the trim, coffee-maned Khajiit dicing hackle-lo in the corner.

“You have brought a guest. Well met.”

“This is Naleva of Polefel.” The quintessential courteous growl of an Argonian. “She rendered assistance and cut short my lateness.”

The bookseller stands to bow.

“And what manner of lateness? Jobasha is honored to meet friends of Huleeya, but assuage his curiosity.”

“The lateness of belligerent Velothi, at the Black Shalk, no less.”

“This one wonders, if the meaning of the words ‘foreign quarter,’ are so opaque?”

“It is not the Imperials who find themselves assaulted.” Huleeya turns to me. “You must tolerate some further lateness, friend Jobasha. I am honourbound to treat with Naleva here.”

“Is there some place we can talk in private?”

“Jobasha’s is most private, and he can be trusted with greater secrets than yours and mine. We do not wish for the Ordinator to overhear, besides.”

"I noticed that fellow on the way in. How's *he* for business? Much of a reader?"

The Khajiit proprietor cuts in.

"The Temple has posted a guard here for this one's own protection. But perhaps better to ask whether he is not here instead to protect others from Jobasha."

"My friend is known for his difficult politics," Huleeya supplies.

"I imagine serving the Morag Tong as an Argonian is difficult enough itself."

"For onlookers, maybe. We are a house of honor, and honor belongs to the mortal, not the race. I do not, of course, carry out writs on native Dunmer, but there are myriad other ways to serve. It is a privilege to serve as the conscience of Morrowind, and be the instrument that spares its people the pointless fratricidal struggles of other lands." Somehow the Great Houses' ability to covertly murder each other does keep the peace, it's true. "But is this what you wished to speak of? It is not the proper way to approach the Morag Tong."

"Forgive me, my business is something else entirely. Hasphat Antabolis referred you to me as a source on the Nerevarine Cult. I would be grateful for any insight you can share, in writing or in reference to useful documents."

Jobasha appears to be listening in with great pleasure, feline tongue crushing fragrant hackle-lo leaf noisily.

"An unexpected request, easily satisfied. In recognition of your ready help, Jobasha and I will prepare a summary for you. By sunset tomorrow, if that is acceptable."

"It is ideal. What can you tell me from memory?"

"The Nerevarine Cult looks to a very different figure than the Temple's Indoril Nerevar, incomprehensibly so, if you do not know ashlander history." He makes eye contact briefly, as Argonians often learn not to do, inquiring whether or not to continue. I nod. "Nerevar's leadership over the First Council was the last moment of parity between settled Dunmer tribes, or Chimer in those days, and the nomads."

"Chimer."

"So easy to forget," Jobasha chimes in. "This was before the curse. Sainted Nerevar had the skin of an Altmer."

"Or so they say," Huleeya continues. "Nerevar swore on Azura's One-Clan-Under-Moon-and-Star ring that he would honor the ways of the Spirits and rights of the Land, and the ashlanders loved him for it. They followed him to war against the Dwemer and the Nords, and their hero Alandro Sul fought at his side. But—and here is where the story diverges from settled history—the Tribunal murdered Nerevar during the aftermath of the battle at Red Mountain, blinding Sul for what he witnessed. And the new regime did not respect Nerevar's promises. The Great Houses grew in power, forcing the ashlanders into the poorest and most hostile wastes. The sources only refer to them as 'ashlanders' in the centuries after Nerevar's death."

"The Tribunal killed their own saint?"

"Every ashlander is sure of it, and they reject the Three as false gods and usurpers of the Daedric ancestors. In their eyes, such unnatural lifetimes can only be signs of profane sorcery or necromancy. Now they look to Nerevar's return for the restoration of their ancient rights and religious traditions. In truth, nothing less will bring them back from the brink these modern times have pushed them to. Between the Blight, the colonization of Vvardenfell and Imperial mining interests, they are a people entering their last days. No wonder they wait for Nerevar to cast down the Tribunal and expel the outlanders, even if such promises are not well supported by the prophecies, as I hear."

"I read the Stranger," I cut in, "but have found little hard information on the others."

"There's your problem. Prophecies and hard information seldom associate. The whole tradition of Nerevarine lore hinges on a handful of wisewomen and their mystic visions, and is subject to misinterpretation, politics and wishful thinking. I know little on this subject." He accepts two cups of tea from Jobasha and hands one to me. "Although the Temple tolerates the ashlander variant of

ancestor worship, they decry dream sendings as superstition or madness. Their objection to the Nerevarine Cult is so strong that they secured the prohibition of it by the Imperial Commission of the Occupation.” He looks at me and grins. “When was the last time you heard of the Empire outlawing a religion?”

“Cyrodiil never did meet a god it didn't like.”

“I should mention the False Incarnates. You have heard of Peakstar?”

“I heard of her death.”

“We shall see on that point. But there is a long line of Nerevarines stretching back towards the First Era. All have either died in pursuit of prophecy or been imprisoned by the Temple. Killed, sometimes. The Temple notes that these False Incarnates discredit the Nerevarine prophecies, while the ashlanders view them as proof. They speak of a Cavern of the Incarnates, where the spirits of the Failed Incarnates dwell. The Nerevarine cult is a mystical faith, and it glorifies, rather than shrinks from, contradictions. “

“An admirable summary,” Jobasha applauds, as if signifying the close of the conversation. “We shall draft the written account on Jobasha's finest paper.”

“My thanks. Be so good as to sell me any books you have on Nerevar, as well.” I rattle off Antabolis' list of recommended volumes. “I won't take up any more of your time.... however, I now have the unenviable task of tracking down a Thieves Guild operative by the name of... Addhiranirr.”

“One cat must needs have one eye on another, yes?” Jobasha winks at me. “I have heard of this Addhiranirr, and she is in town. Her continuing evasion of a Census and Excise agent is a topic if growing mirth.”

“So she is in hiding?”

“Sorry to say. But naturally the canalworks would be the usual place to look.”

I thank Huleeya warmly and depart, wishing I could complete all my missions with the violent simplicity of a barroom brawl.

“Why does Cosades think me learned?” Addhiranirr purrs at me through the darkness of an Olms canton sewer tunnel. We are on our way up to the overcrowded canalworks slum, now that her bureaucratic pursuer has departed. Todwendy herself would have applauded my falsehoods, so ably I rid Vivec of him.

“So you truly have never heard of the Sixth House?”

“You have come from Caius, so of course he tells you all about Addhiranirr, how she is a friend of Caius, and who does little things for Caius, but who knows nothing of this cult, not even in a sugar dream.”

“And not the Nerevarine either, I take it.”

“Yes, Addhiranirr knows nothing about this Nerevarine cult, because it is just silly superstition. So you tell Caius this. Nobody in her right mind pays any attention to this nonsense. Prophecies and ancient heroes reborn and other silliness. Fuzzy tales for little kitties.”

“Caius explicitly told me that your activities as a smuggler would have brought you into contact with the Sixth House.”

“Contact! The very word, yes, yes. Smuggling has.”

Damn cats.

“I thought you said you knew nothing.”

“Nothing is what this one knows! No one knows about the Sixth House. But Addhiranirr will tell you about smuggling. Some smart smugglers are suddenly too busy for their old clients, because they have a new employer, the Sixth House, who pays *very* well.”

“Go on.”

"But what do they smuggle now? Addhiranirr doesn't know, because they are very secret. And this is odd, because these smugglers are always loud and bragging, and now they hush up like fat-bellied kitties full of sweet-meats."

"You think they take on new cargo now? What kind of timeframe?"

"Months. A year. Maybe more."

"And could you identify some of these smart smugglers?"

"Even for friend Caius, this is too much to ask. But Addhiranirr will say that the *smart* smugglers like the Bitter Coast, in the south."

We meet at the top of the canalworks ladder, and the Khajiit looks at me expectantly.

"I have no further questions."

"Walk on warm sands, Dunmer."

"And you." An interesting expression for Vvardenfell, where warm sands tend to mean the ashlands in a mountain wind. Addhiranirr's contributions are slightly disappointing, although I suppose the bit about smuggling is new information, and more on the order of Blades intelligence work. For all his helpfulness, Huleeya may as well have been another academic.

Caius, who seemed to anticipate my paying a lot of bribes, provided a hefty stipend for Vivec, so I spend the night in a plaza inn. St. Olms is fairly cheap anyhow, and I should get used to staying at places like this all-Dunmer cornerclub, if I'm to keep up this line of work.

At this point, I no longer have any idea *why* I decided to stay in said line of work. Although the events, even the words (I fill in some blanks myself) of those days are clear in my mind, my inner thoughts are not. Naleva of Polefel had a mindset that is gone now, and I can only speculate. Why did I follow Cosades' orders, accepting my non-consensual induction into one of Tamriel's most professional and secretive institutions? Put the thought out of your mind that I was flattered or overawed. No, Naleva of those days should have balked at such coercion, even the relatively gentle treatment she received on Vvardenfell. Pragmatic survival is the other option, yet I should have railed against it to some degree, rather than cooperating so sanguinely. I'll suffice with the unsatisfying answer that my life as Naleva of CiCi Polefel ended that day in the Lockbox District, and that once apart from the city and the life with Gallenus' foundlings, I had no other existence but what the Empire threw at me. Caius' orders gave me purpose, which was of little importance; they stimulated old skills, which was gratifying; and they staved off the necessity of finding some manner of life on this bizarre rock, which was paramount.

Dire thoughts to fall asleep to, and of course dire dreams resulted. Once again the emaciated marionette with the powerful limbs, and the golden mask on top. *There are many rooms in the house of the Master. Be easy, for from the hands of your enemies I have delivered you.* And the awful, blinding music began again. When I woke, my face was covered in tears from the beauty of it.

So that's number two. I hope I'm not getting my own touch of prophecy here. A morning Mazte makes the dream easier to forget. Helps with facing the Vivec traffic as well, although High Fane is right across the water there. Last stop in Vivec is the Temple's library, where a priestess-librarian friend of Caius' is expecting me. And for the first time, it's a sneak job. No taking to the robes.

The tranquility of High Fane is enough to take you aback. Cross the bridge and the noise of Vivec recedes to the north faster than you can walk. The cantons are still there, and the banners and floating netch, but for the first time you can hold the city away from yourself, examining it at length and at leisure. That's the first time I really began to become accustomed to the place, standing there watching the canals wink at me. The Temple grounds are plenty crowded, but the Dunmer here are mostly silent, pilgrims moving around in knots to the various statues and shrines. This early in the morning, the Ministry of Truth casts its shadow away over the water, so it's easy to forget its presence. Ships slide in and out of Ebonheart like a collection of individual paintings, stark white against the citadel's tower (which rivals Vivec's pyramid in height) and the dragon statue of pure ebony on the docks. A piece of work, that sculpture, standing in front of the East Empire Company's offices,

reminding all and sundry why the Empire is really here.

Caius doesn't want me to mention Milo's name to anyone, so he has provided detailed instructions to the library. There's also a bit of scarab shell that apparently serves as a scholar's pass, although once again some books (from Jobasha) will help me look the part. No one challenges me at the entrance to the Hall of Wisdom. Passing into the foundations of High Fane's triple structure that resembles so much Telvanni headgear, I realize that the name is apt. This really is just a hallway, narrow and unadorned, with side passages and ramps (what do the Dunmer have against stairs?) branching off. Second floor, second right. Asking directions won't do, and I don't want to want betray my foreignness, so let's get this on the first pass, shall we?

And damnit, I walk too far, distracted by a middle-aged mer with plaited hair in the winking glass armor of the Buoyant Armigers. He halts upon seeing me, his face suddenly transformed by some inner wave of mirth. Nonplussed, I receive a deep bow in which there is no trace of irony, and he glides away chanting verse. No one else in the hall seems the wiser for it, and I find the correct turn in puzzlement.

For the largest public archive next to Mournhold (and not sat on by the Telvanni), this does not look much like a library. Jobasha's has more books, and I realize that the floor has been marked up by dozens of shelves recently removed. Some of the open space now plays host to statues, prayer fonts and furniture. Ordinators flank the entry door, and a wizened priest whose robe supplies most of his body weight takes my shell fragment with a grunt. While he scribbles in a clean new ledger, I have a few seconds to look about the library. The place is nigh on deserted, except for a willowy woman in a blue robe just beyond the foyer. Sitting motionless on a broad table with a dilapidated scroll and some prayer beads in her hands, it is definitely my contact. Copper hair and copper eyes, just like Caius said.

I approach, head scanning the shelves for the benefit of the Ordinators, but eyes fixed unerringly on the informant. Mehra Milo has a face that is withdrawn and sad. The copper in her eyes could be seen twenty paces across the room, but so far as it extends to her hair it is a worn-out metal, left out in the weather for too long. If it could turn green, it would. She notices me briefly, dropping her legs from the chair to the floor so her robe is not in quite so much disarray. The somber look on her face comes through more strongly. Although she's clearly as sheltered as any Ascadian sweetlander, for a moment I'm back on that ashlands plateau overlooking the Odai, in the grey-blue evening.

Now I have drawn close enough that the look in my eyes is unmistakable. The idea dawns on her. She stands fully, tucking the scroll into a hidden pocket with the beads wrapped in one loose fist.

"Mehra Milo. I was told you could show me the Tract of Saint Rilms."

"Certainly. I won't be able to attend you personally, but I will let you down into the lower archives. A novice will collect you from the waiting room and bring you to the viewing chamber after that." Her voice has the soft, distant quality you would expect, but her face is now full of tension. I follow her to the back of the library, where she unlocks a door and ushers me down a steeply inclined passage. After a swift look over her shoulder, she speeds after me.

"Caius sent you?" She makes the inquiry in a conspiratorial whisper that is almost girlish.

"Of course. He has some questions." Somehow I have ended up leading her along, even though I don't know where to go.

"Do you work for him? We can talk in the room at the end of this hall." All languidness from before now gone, she walks damned fast, pressing me forward along the narrow corridor. Not knowing what else to do when reaching our destination, I open the door outward, and she slips around the side, robes brushing against my leg, to enter the room first.

"Close the door, there." The tiny room is tomb-dark, and she caresses the lone candle until it sparks into life, revealing an additional exit on each wall. "This is the waiting room for the closed archives, but we won't be disturbed here. What is your name?"

"Naleva of Polefel. Caius Cosades sent me." I'll repeat it, if it will put her at ease.

"So soon? I trust him with my life, but—nevermind. You'll need a copy of the 'Progress of

Truth.' It will tell you everything—”

“Hold on. I don't quite follow.” She looks relieved to be cut off. “Caius sent me to find information on the Nerevarine cult. I am collecting sources on the ashlander Incarnates and oral prophecies.”

“Oh.” She sits down at the table, clasping her hands together and resting her chin on them. “On that count I know what any scholar does. But the Nerevarine cult isn't just among the ashlanders. Some of the faithful recognize the validity of the prophecies as well.” How carefully she speaks now, no longer remotely flustered.

“Go on.”

“The Dissident Priests, a persecuted group of heretics, mostly in hiding. The proscribed book 'Progress of Truth' describes their beliefs, and should tell Caius everything he needs to know.”

“A proscribed book? Where can I obtain it?”

Her voice drops immediately. Copper candlelight in her eyes.

“I have a copy here, but it's too risky with the Ordinators sniffing about. A safer plan would be to search the Foreign Quarter markets. Some booksellers ignore Temple bans on outlawed books for profits or principles.”

“Security is tight around here, isn't it?”

She hesitates.

“Caius sent you, so I suppose you know already... I do not care for Temple politics. But I have read 'Progress of Truth,' and it troubles me. I have friends, former priests, who have gone into hiding, so I am bound to come to the attention of the Ordinators. I am careful, but I'm no agent, like you or Caius.” The prayer beads come out again.

“You know Caius' occupation?”

“Of course. He was—is a dear friend. He may be a Westerner, and an Emperor's man, but he admires the Temple's better traditions, and sees its falling virtues as a tragedy, as do I.” She looks past my shoulder and shifts abruptly in her seat. “It doesn't make you a heretic to distrust those Ordinators, and their power. Or even to know that the way the Tribunal tells their history isn't meant to be literally true.” I seem to have led her on to some sore point, and her shadowed face becomes alluring as she argues with herself. “The ashlanders call them false gods, but the Dissident Priests—well, they just seek the truth, is all. Because the Temple is still all we have. No one else really cares for the poor, even if the higher-ups live like princes... charity truly is what the Temple has stood for, ever since...”

“But the Dissident Priests are being hunted.”

“Yes. I suppose there's not much else they can really do. Heresy weakens the faith of the people, on the wane ever since the Armistice, and faith is what sustains the Ghostfence. Every apostasy is another day of Blight and—and they stuck Malur Omayn up there in the *Ministry*.” Her apologetic sentence ends in anger, a sudden reversal. “The situation is bad, but the Temple is only destroying itself by giving free reign to its militant wing. This repression can't go on.” She stands. “Find that book for Caius, Naleva, and tell him not to send anyone else to visit me. I may have to go into hiding soon.” Mehra's gaze drops to the floor, and her lashes lie across the bruised circles beneath her eyes. “If it comes to it, and we lose contact, I will leave a message for the both of you, under the name Amaya.”

She looks back up all at once, and seems taken aback by how intently I was watching her.

“Should I leave first, or should you?”

“You should wait here for several hours,” she says, “and read those books you have there. Just don't let anyone see the title of 'Nerevar Moon-and-Star.’”

“Is this one banned as well?”

“No, but it is suspicious. I hope I have been helpful. Farewell, Naleva of Polefel.”

“My thanks, Mehra Milo.”

Not the proper address for a priestess, maybe, but I don't think she noticed as she swept out the door in a flap of robes. Oh well, stuck in the dark now with lots of reading to do, tracing the lines of

copper tresses with the fingers of my left hand.

“Really, Jobasha is surprised that you did not buy this from him yesterday.” I pocket the illicit book, handing the Khajiit a sizable portion of Caius' stipend.

“I did not know of its existence yesterday,” I reply. “I am still new to this province, and Caius gives me little in the way of instruction. Is Huleeya around?”

“Huleeya left on a call. This one is completed the notes he left, on the Nerevarine. It is rather elementary, but your master may find it illuminating.”

“Excellent. That's saved me some time.”

Jobasha retrieves a packet from his bedside table, and I see that he has bound the pages with brightly-colored thread.

“Should Naleva ever aid another of Jobasha's friends, perhaps one that cannot in fact help himself, or should she ever need information, come back again.”

“I am bound for Balmora, but I'll be sure to keep your establishment in mind. Thank you for the help.”

“By strider?”

“Pardon?”

“Naleva returns to the stonewood by strider, yes?”

“Well, I suppose.”

“Take a good look at the ground beneath you as you travel.”

Watching the ground in Ascadia mostly means watching the slaves. The strider route takes us past Pelagiad (some county in High Rock is missing its hamlet) and the western areas where single-family homesteads predominate, but we pass close enough to Orvas Dren's plantation to see a round thousand of them. None of the strider's other passengers think anything of it, even the Cyrodils and the lone Khajiit. The Empire seems to get on well enough with slavery, simply outlawing the trade and bizarrely demanding that the practice no longer be restricted by law to beastfolk. (What with half the ashlanders fleeing the Blight ending up as barely-paid laborers in ebony and glass mines, they've introduced a passing approximation of the practice themselves.) Maybe this is what Huleeya meant by mentioning Jobasha's unpopular opinions. I just didn't know that abolitionism was unpopular. 'Bad for business,' I imagine the Nibenean next to me saying. When Caius organizes the strider trips (the costliness of on-demand transport is just beginning to dawn on me), there aren't all these ornery companions crowding the cockpit. After Vivec, I really needed some space. My brief visit has put Balmora on a homely pedestal in my mind.

I take up the Dissident Priests' book to escape from the sight of chattel and bondage. *On the Feeding and Mating Habits of the Kagouti*, reads the cover. I suppose it could be worse. The Dissident Priests are apparently efficient, empathetic souls: they have provided an abstract. I like them better all the time, even if they can't all be as interesting as Mehra Milo. I won't blame you if you skip some of this, seeing as I put it into practice later.

1. Temple doctrine claims the Tribunal's apotheosis was miraculously achieved through questing, virtue, knowledge, testing, and battling with Evil; Temple doctrine claims their divine powers and immortality are ultimately conferred as a communal judgment by the Dunmer ancestors [including, among others, the Good Daedra, the prophet Veloth, and Saint Nerevar]. Dissident Priests ask whether Dagoth Ur's powers and the Tribunal

powers might ultimately derive from the same source—Red Mountain. Sources in the Apographa suggest that the Tribunal relied on profanely enchanted tools to achieve godhood, and that those unholy devices were the ones originally created by the ungodly Dwemer sorcerer Kagrenac to create the False Construct Numidium.

2. The Dissident Priests say that the Temple has always maintained a public face [represented by the Heirographa -- the "priestly writings"] and a hidden face [represented by the Apographa -- the "hidden writings"]. The public account portrays the actions of the Tribunal in a heroic light, while the hidden writings reveal secrets, untruths, inconsistencies, conflicting accounts and varying interpretations which hint at darker and less heroic motives and actions of the Tribunes. In particular, conflicting accounts of the battle at Red Mountain raise questions about the Tribunal's conduct, and about the source of their subsequent apotheosis. Also, there is good evidence that the Tribunal have been concealing the true nature of the threat posed by Dagoth Ur at Red Mountain, misleading the people about the Tribunal's ability to protect Morrowind from Dagoth Ur, and concealing a recent dramatic diminishing of the Tribunal's magical powers.

3. Ashlander tradition does not place the Tribunal at Red Mountain, and holds that the Dwemer destroyed themselves, rather than that Nerevar destroyed them. Ashlander tradition further holds that Nerevar left Dagoth Ur guarding the profane secrets of Red Mountain while Nerevar went to confer with the Grand Council [i.e., the Tribunal], that Nerevar died at the conference [not of his wounds, according to the ashlanders, but from treachery], and that subsequently the Tribunal confronted a defiant Dagoth Ur within Red Mountain, then drove Dagoth Ur beneath Red Mountain when he would not yield to their will.

4. While challenging the divinity of the Tribunal, the Dissidents do not challenge the sainthood or heroism of the Tribunal. In fact, the Dissident Priests advocate restoring many of the elements of Fundamentalist Ancestor Worship as practiced by the ashlanders and by Saint Veloth. Exactly how this would work is debated inconclusively within the Dissident Priests.

5. Though no consensus exists among the Dissidents about whether the Nerevarine prophecies are genuine, all agree that the persecution of the Nerevarines is unjust and politically motivated. The Dissident Priests do not reject mysticism, revelation, or prophecy as part of the religious experience. The Dissidents have not resolved the issue of true or false insights. They have studied the mysticism of the ashlander Ancestor Cults, in particular the rites of the ashlander seers and wise women, and the prophecies of the Incarnate. Many among the Dissident Priests have come to believe that the Nerevarine prophecies are genuine, and have made a systematic study of prophecies recorded in Temple archives.

6. The Dissident Priests reject the authority of the Archcanon and the Ordinators. The temple hierarchy has been corrupted by self-interest and politics, and no longer acts in the best interests of the Temple or its worshipers. The Dissident Priests believe the Archcanon and Ordinators speak for themselves, not for the Tribunal. Within the Temple hierarchy it is an open secret that the Ordinators rely on abduction, terror, torture, and secret imprisonment to discourage heresy and dissent. The Dissident Priests feel the Ordinators are either out of control, or tools used to maintain a corrupt priesthood in power. Though the Dissident Priests acknowledge that most rank-and-file priests honor the best traditions of the Temple, they believe that many priests in higher ranks are interested more in love of authority and luxury than in the welfare of the poor, weak, and ignorant.

So this Temple of Mehra's has some dirty laundry, and not just lately, but maybe three thousand years of it. I can definitely see the love and hate. That leaves the question of what the Empire wants with this information. Are they planning a night of long knives, taking apart the troublesome Temple hierarchy with a co-opted False Incarnate? No, this is Uriel Septim the bloody Seventh we have here. The Temple could be discredited fairly easily, though, dividing the more troublesome elements in politics and society. The Sixth House cult could serve as an excellent excuse there. But it's not really the Empire that's hurting here. The ebony still flows, and their grip is firm as ever. Maybe some symptom of the Emperor's sickness, and that simulacrum heir nonsense. With Nibennium in such a state, the Elder Council must be seeing instability everywhere.

More good thoughts to doze off with, I know. Gallenus once called me the little soldier for my ability to fall asleep anywhere, a talent the persisted into adolescence. So go ahead and add a silt strider to the list, a worthy addition by any standard.

And then, the third dream. I have never been much of a dreamer, so I must be turning into a wise woman, on home turf and all. The same figure returns again, and since he does not introduce himself, I have named him Maskyface. This time he *smiles through* his mask and extends a powerful, desiccated arm towards me in a friendly sort of way. His nailless hand reaches effortlessly, painlessly into my chest, seeking around for my heart, and the revulsion jolts me away, slamming my head into a piece of chitin. I know it terrifies me into waking, but I nevertheless have the unshakable recollection of listening to him talk at length, on and on. The words skitter away as they come.

Apparently I have made a scene while unconscious, because the passengers have shifted away from me slightly. The Dunmer in particular look mortified. Our strider has stopped, and for a moment I wonder whether my night terrors have provoked some emergency. Instead, however, we appear to be halted on the road, with several dozen legionaries milling about in front of us. They have a pair of carts, piled high with tall clay jars and barrels, and in the kresh at the roadside kneel six or seven bound men. I lean out of the cockpit, gripping the spongy cap of an emperor parasol to steady myself. Sai be good, they've caught some smugglers.

"I'm dismounting here," I call out on a whim. The mahout looks back with an irate expression. Now he has to rig the rope ladder all over again, with Pelagiad only an hour back along the road. His sluggishness begins to look obstructive, so I press a few coins into his hand and gather my new satchel with the four books inside. My second impromptu descent from a strider is much more convenient than the first, but I am rushing and almost lose my footing anyhow. It always was easier to climb a tree than a ladder.

My shoes crunch into the rich Ascadian earth for the first time, tiny insects haloing my head. The prisoners are having their rope bindings swapped out for iron manacles, and over there's the cave where the goods were stored. A trio of armored orcs emerge from the entrance, rolling four heavy barrels between them. I identify the most hassled-looking officer in sight, a tanned Breton sweating under his helmet even in the cool night breeze.

"Hail, soldier. What's the take?" Is this a passing imitation of Caius' tone? He does get very Imperial when the skooma act isn't on.

"Eh? Mostly just the taxed liquor, only a trace of monopoly good—wait, who the hell are you?"

Is it noisy enough out here? The strider starts grunting, so yes.

"I'm keeping tabs on things for Sir Caius Cosades." I tap the pommel of my blade as if that means something. "You were saying?" Either it's the tone that gets it, or the added 'sir,' because the name clearly means nothing to him.

"Oh, just take a look for yourself. Only interesting stuff is in those square crates up front."

You know I will. A salute, and I'm up on top of the nearest cart. Booze, booze, glass shavings, potions of some sort, and a square crate. The lid pops off easily, revealing a layer of rushes. Down underneath, however, stand lovingly-arranged rows of red statuettes. Or I suppose that they are statues; they aren't entirely humanoid, although I imagine the outline of head and shoulders, two slits for eyes

and two knobbly horns. They appear fashioned out of packed grey ash, with red highlights that prove to be some sort of raised metal lattice about the sides.

Surely this isn't a taxed trade item? I grab hold of one—
“Arkayprotects!”

—and my entire arm shudders, or maybe just my head. The dream flashes behind my eyes, and five fingers clutch my heart. I stuff one of the statues into my satchel with such reflexive speed that no one notices. Addhiranirr, you are a damned useful cat.

The strider has since moved off, and despite the ponderousness of its movements as it quickly fades into the dark distance, I know that the swiftest Khajiit could never catch it. What's more, the legionaries back there have Pelagiad's insignia, not Moonmoth's, so I'm on my own for the trip back to Balmora. Oh well. It's half the distance I walked before, and I slept a little, so why not just keep on through the night? There's always the Fort as a possible waystation.

Get down to it, then, through the fragrant Ascadian evening, with Masser and Secunda casting shadows through the big-leafed trees. The lagoons are thunderous with insects, amphibians and night birds, enough for my tired mind to switch back and forth between Vvardenfell and Nibenay. Maybe for the first time, I don't miss home. Truth is, I was trapped on that archipelago, with Gallenus and a bunch of orphans going nowhere. All the happiness I remember was actually in those wilderness days, and that's what Vvardenfell recalls. The people here have more space, less stone pressing in on their minds, and I like tangling wits with them. Hell, am I not a born city girl after all?

By the time the sign for Balmora points out a lefthand turn, my sanguine assessment of the journey begins to falter. This means Foyada Mamaea. Only a few miles of it, true, but still Vvardenfell's biggest foyada, alone at night. That road back there was longer than I could have believed, too. Wish I had my staff.

The road intersects the foyada through a raincut canyon in the ridge-wall, several hundred feet of steep incline, then down to the volcanic pavement below. I tick through the ways to die in here, remembering the stories of the ex-caravaner who shared my strider on the way down. The foyada won't fill without warning, of course, but if it did, could I scramble up those slick, dusty slopes fast enough? How far above the lava do you have to get to avoid roasting like a pig? The dead trees scratch at the moons like spits designed for the purpose.

I got through without incident, of course, forgetting how short the passage on the strider was, two days before (I had barely had time to get my eyes' fill before we exited the ravine). Sure, I had to kick a few kwama foragers to death, but that comes with the territory. I ended up almost too exhausted to pay for the privilege of Fort Moonmoth's stables.

“Run into many smugglers in your time here?” I figure Todwendy already knows more than she should, and there's no point fighting it. We have just separated, falling winded onto different benches in the Fighters Guild training yard.

“Smugglers? Sure, I worked for the Hlaalu, but don't presume that I'm completely criminal.” She drops the staff, today's sparring session apparently over, and I do the same. The deadly Redguard is my equal, despite her lack of familiarity with the weapon. Her speed and ferocity make our duels a harrowing, bruising affair, but I held my ground. And then there's the reward of seeing her thin kresh fiber clothes drenched in sweat. Her skin glistens like some sort of exhausted bronze statue.

“Well I thought you might know all types. You got us in here, and turns out the Fighters Guilds is fairly... that...”

“Ha!” She whips her head about, trying to banish the locks of hair struck to her forehead. “Even so, I never had much to do with *Vvardenfell* smugglers. That's your department, remember?”

The ash statue is with Caius now, along with all the other results of my Vivec mission last week.

He is skeptical that the trifle is the Sixth House cargo our Khajiit source alluded to, but had Antabolis look it over anyways. That was a dead end, so now it's bound for the Mages Guild, sometime this evening. Once I work up the nerve to transport the damned thing there.

Todwendy reaches into the satchel containing her day clothes. And holy hell, is that an apple? Where did she get that? She tosses the precious Western gem to me, taking another for herself. Before I can thank her, she retrieves the paralyzing mask as well, and the thanks die in my mouth.

"What are you bringing that out for?"

"Don't worry; no one is taking a dirt nap today." She puts her index finger in the eye socket and twirls the delicate artifact in slow circles. "I always wished for some sort of arcane talent, you know."

"Didn't know your people went for that too often."

"Well, yes and no. All Hammerfell's obsessed with stories of Alik'r sorcery and Yokudan sword magic; it's just the Mages Guild variety they don't think much of. And I've never lived in the homeland anyways." She sets the mask on the bench with sudden reverence. "Come over here."

This is going nowhere I like, but I obey because the smell of her gives me that down low tickle.

"Is this really the place for this?"

"Just touch it. You have a knack for this; I know you won't knock yourself out again." Easy for you to say, hotlips. It's like sticking my hand into a candleflame, in the moment before you feel the heat. But the mask doesn't bite this time.

"Well? Naleva?" By the Divines, there it is. The lacquered wood lets me in this time, and I can stroke the flowing contours of the enchantment, picking at loose threads of it like— "If you could only see your face!"

"What about my face?" She's grinning at me now.

"You have that trickster wrapped around your little finger, don't you?"

"I..."

"...know less about enchanting than I do, don't you? Shameful ignorance." She shifts on the bench in her good humor, and our thighs brush together. Heat and damp. "What I know, Naleva, is that when an enchantress has an implanted spell well in hand, she can apply it to other objects. Since you remind me of my younger self, why not let me live vicariously as well? I want to see what you can do."

"Do?"

"I'll need this mask when I leave Vvardenfell. We're both in a dangerous line of work, after all. You're a decent fighter so far, but imagine what you could be if you duplicated the enchantment with that staff there. Now *that* would keep you alive without my help."

"Are you leaving soon?" Chuna is in Ald'ruhn for the week, and she is more a friend than anyone.

Todwendy laughs.

"Don't change the subject; I'll miss your funny face too. I'm talking about lifesaving craftsmanship, here. Let's hit the Mages Guild today. They're right next door."

"Don't we need soul gems for that?"

"You can buy them on premises. And the robes have all the other equipment on hand as well."

"Those are expensive."

She tucks the mask back into her satchel and pitches her apple core over the wall into some unlucky Balmoran's market stall awning.

"So doesn't your boss pay you? He asks some ratty jobs of you. Ask for an advance. How was Vivec, by the way?"

"Pretty much how you'd expect."

"And what am I to expect? I've never been."

I blink in surprise in that, having assumed that Todwendy's experiences and ability in every way outstripped my own. Except maybe when it comes to paralyzing people.

"I'll ask about money for a soulgem. But I wouldn't know what to do with it."

"I've read about it. And the mages will charge us for the use of their facilities in any case, so they'll be on hand to help."

It occurs to me that she is once again offering assistance on a whim. The realization of ingratitude shows on my face.

"It's settled, then. We'll go see the mumblers."

"Alright. But sometime tonight. Sunset or so. I need to go see C—"

"Careful, Naleva. Some unfriendly people are as pretty as I am."

For once she senses that her needling has gone too far. 'Sunset,' I repeat, and make for Cosades' house.

Even as I cross the Odai, something is not right. The locals tend not to loiter around the dwelling, as if Caius' desire for sugar and solitude wards them off. But as I close in on the upper terraces, one figure has not moved from his doorstep. This fellow is standing bolt upright, strange in an Argonian, as if standing guard with that bow of his. Ambiguous lizardfolk expressions be damned, it is certainly a scowl he directs at my approach.

"Who goes there?"

"What do you mean, 'who?'"

"No visitors."

"I'm not a visitor. I have business here."

Caius' voice sounds from within.

"Let her through, Nine-Toes." Not even that recommendation nets me any good will from the Argonian, I note.

The house is unusually well-lit. Another shirtless evening for Cosades, but this time because of the great bloody bandage swaddling his chest. With a shock, I notice the naked corpse lying in his bed.

"What in—"

"Do keep your voice down, Naleva. Come and take a look at my attacker."

"This fellow atta..." It isn't actually a Dunmer corpse. At least not anymore. The thing is as tall than any Altmer I've seen, its limbs and torso distorted in some subtle way I cannot quite define. Its musculature is *off*, providing the impression of freakish strength and undernourishment. My dreams contain something similar, in a more imposing form. This one seems to be decomposing, as the grey particles of its skin are flaking off onto the bedsheets in the form of fine dust.

"It broke down my door last night." He rolls the carcass onto his back and I think I may have clutched his arm in a moment of weakness. If not, I probably wanted to.

"It has no face!" To be precise, everything between chin and brow was scooped out, leaving a crescent-shaped black abyss. Marks on the rim of the great horrific cavity left me convinced that the husk had done it himself. Peering inside, I could see no evidence of skull or brains, even though half of the head's thickness was still excavated. The wound was simply lined with more of the same sallow blackish skin.

"No need to recoil so, Naleva. Nine-Toes has assured me that this is not a corpus walker. I am waiting for Antabolis to verify it as a Sixth House beast."

It's then I notice my ash statue standing on his dining table.

"Scuttling Hell! You didn't leave that out all night, did you?"

"Why, no. It has been in a footlocker. I expect you to keep the appointment at the Mages Guild."

"And did you have dreams?" Wrong tone of voice there.

"No." The unspoken question is, 'did you?' "Have you shared *all* your information with me, Naleva?"

"Of course. Everything I turned up."

He flips the ash creature back over. I can't for the life of me fathom why he would lay the disgusting thing down in his own bed.

"Very well. Take that statue across the river and see what you can find out."

If I was hesitant to touch the mask, the statue is worse, but Caius is watching so I grip the neck in my fist. No waking dreams this time.

"I have a request."

"Hmm?"

"Despite my nonviolent role here, I have been in two fights since accepting your assignments, one of them fatal. If this is to go on, I would like to be better prepared."

"You have no serious mission at the moment, and the Blades agents I mentioned will provide instruction if you ask them."

"I meant more in the way of equipment. Your stipends are ample, but I can't know how long they are going to continue. Rather than buy gear, I feel the need to save—"

"Fine. Spend whatever you have now and I will reimburse you."

"I appreciate it."

Cosades goes back to looking at the corpse, thinking too hard to stop me from exiting the room with the statue under my arm for all to see. Upon crossing the bridge, a Dunmer in a patchy robe fell to his knees at the sight of it, but at the moment I didn't care to give him a second glance. Todwendy met me at the guild entrance, leaning against pillar with dusk's shadows blanking out her face.

"Well met again. How are your bruises treating you?"

"First tell me you feel yours." We enter, apparently disturbing the crimson-eyed woman inside.

"You can't actually be present for this meeting of mine, you know."

"Naturally. I will go and inquire about enchanting. Did you get the coin?"

"I have a few hundred left over."

"No matter. If it works I'll pay half."

Before I can turn around to exclaim on her open handedness, she has launched me down the hall with my statue. The second floor has only a few rooms, so finding Galbedir isn't hard. A pinched-looking young Bosmer in a garish yellow robe, she seems disappointed she can't complain of my lateness.

"Naleva, I presume?"

"Aye. I'll keep the explanations short. I'd like you to examine this object here and tell me about any magical properties." I hand over the statue.

"A very... native, item, isn't it?" Is she worried I'll be offended?

"The very nativest. Is your analysis likely to take time?"

I see her debating whether or not to give me the runaround and put on some arcane show.

"Not at all." He better angels prevail. "I can tell you right now that there is no conventional, that is, standard school Aetherial, magic to it. ...what I can say is that it serves as a conduit of some sort."

"A conduit of what?"

"It's usually some sort of communication. Surveillance? Messaging? Religious communion? There's a whole range of possibilities. There's a chance I could pin it down more exactly, but that *would* take more time. And money. A week, perhaps."

"I'm not sure on that. Let me think on it and come back."

Yes, let me think on it. I am gut-sure that this is the item the Sixth House is smuggling off and around the island. If they are smuggling them, the statues must be easily recognizable as profane items, which means the Temple would be able to identify it. Damn, why didn't I think of that before? Maybe Mehra Milo made me flighty about the Tribunal folks. Wouldn't want to see her copper head in a floating moon cell...

"Will that be all?"

"I think so." With statuettes all over Morrowind, the Sixth House has a network of... conduits. Messages through dreams, with the figure in the golden mask. Do they give orders that way? Then why the mass production, and why reach out to me? Caius was attacked mere nights after holding one of those statues in his house. Are they only meant for Dunmer? Surveillance, Galbedir says.

Todwendy's cheery face pops into the room and my pondering.

"Are you two done?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Turns out, Galbedir is the resident enchanter as well, so we aren't done."

I won't inflict the full process on you. Towendy proved impossible to satisfy or shame, willfully ignoring Galbedir's desire to close up for the night. I was supposed to be doing the enchanting myself, so the wood elf was already losing out on the bulk of her fee, despite the four hundred drake soul gem purchase. The mage offered to tell me what sort of creature had filled it, but I decided not to know.

The enchanting altar had a sort of metaphysical halfway house that allowed me to repeatedly duplicate the mask's charm until I got it right, only committing it to the soul gem and staff (which Todwendy dropped out to fetch, allowing me to apologize in her absence) at the very end. As Galbedir warned of early on, the mask started smoldering at one point, the guild mage saving it from destruction with a swift cantrip. Somehow it all came together at the end, much to Todwendy's satisfaction and Galbedir's shock. I think the Bosmer was somewhat unnerved that an amateur could pull off such a delicate, academic operation. My staff now pulses at any touch, announcing itself and the rippling malice within. At the time I was too mistrustful of it to be proud, and a little mortified when Todwendy urged me to test it on her. I looked at Galbedir, realizing that she was too annoyed with my companion to fear for her safety.

As we left the guild, though, the crazy raga checked the plaza for onlookers and went into a fighting crouch, urging me on with an impish grin. I gave her a gentle swat on the thigh, stilling the yelp in her throat as every muscle in her body went slack and dumped her onto the paving stones. For a slow count of five she lay there, her chest heaving helplessly up and down. She could not speak, but I could see curiosity and wonder, rather than pain, in her eyes. Lucky that Chuna was gone from Balmora, or else she would have wanted to test it again.

Her idea to enchant the staff rather than the sword was a sound one, giving my makeshift spear a lethal and nonlethal end, or providing me with a debilitating, unobtrusive walking stick. Caius assures me that I will attract less attention traveling armed, as the role of a freelance mercenary is easy to assume. He's right; I got more curious looks on the strider to Vivec than the strider to Ald'ruhn this morning.

I sat next to a talkative Breton who filled my ears with everything I could have wanted to know about Ald Skar. He began talking as we passed through Caldera, and my morning fatigue revived at the sight of the surprisingly pleasant West Gash. If these rocky moors lack Ascadia's idyllic quality, they also lack its humidity, insects and slaves. The Breton was not the only outlander on board, and the number of non-Dunmer on this island still amazes me. Remarking on that, this fellow (who could have left Wayrest yesterday) ticked off the list of settlements that had existed before the opening of settlement. Vivec, Balmora, Ald'ruhn here, Gnisiss, Sadrith Mora.

"Everything else is new. Except for some of the Telvanni towers, which aren't really towns, and a handful of coastal villages."

"I would have guessed that Seyda Neen had been there since the dawn of time."

"But really, just a few years. Same with all the new growth around Vivec."

"Everyone must have vacated after the year of Sun's Death."

"Ah, another student of history, I see. The year of Red Mountain, yes. All but the ashlanders fled, and the Temple kept most of them from coming back."

Just then the mahout blew his horn, and Ald'ruhn's inimitable Redoran watchtowers poked their keyhole heads through the haze. It was blowing perhaps one quarter of an ash storm, the wind a gentle

rasp that only carried enough sediment to irritate the eyes. I alone chose to expose myself to the punishment by looking out at the town above the sheltering lip of the cockpit. Except for the breached walls and the handful of crustacean buildings near the strider port, there was little enough to see.

While we dock, I go over Caius' assignment. Find Hassour Zainsubani, an ashlander who left the wastes to become a wealthy trader. I'm to ask the usual questions about the Nerevarine cult from a firsthand source, but also seek a general education in ashlander customs and concepts of courtesy. Is Cosades thinking of having me turn diplomat? And here I thought he knew my strengths. At least there was another nice stipend for this trip, plus the cost of the soul gem sitting in a separate coffer at his house.

The Breton escorts me to the Ald Skar inn, in his estimation one of the city's more reputable establishments. After doing his duty to inform me that he is bound for the prestigious district Under-Skar (the shell is still obscured by blowing ash, and if I try not to focus on its curving silhouette, the sight of it doesn't kick in the old survival instincts too much) we part. The innkeeper says to expect Hassour by evening, still hours off. Or I can wait by the caravanserai, where he'll show up if the weather doesn't delay him. I opt to walk around the city instead, mountain wind be damned. Todwendy pointed out with some justice that I tend to drink a lot early in the day, so best to avoid the inn until sunset. I had not thought to rebuke her for the unwarranted motherly chiding, as she announced her imminent departure from Balmora and thence Ebonheart, dismaying me momentarily. If I can conclude my business here in a day, there will be time for a farewell.

Redoran's Temple is rather small, surprisingly so for what I know of that House's piety, squatting beneath the bluffs at the edge of town. I had not guessed that there could be entire cities in the ashlands, yet the ashlands this surely is. There is no real comparison to the narrow waste near Seyda Neen, nor even the trench of Foyada Mamaea. After all, it's the weather that stings but the expanse that kills, and the Redoran hide beneath their crab shell in a vast ocean of dark, lashing hostility. For all the stories of their exploits, many doubtless true, the Three are sweetlander gods, scorned by the true inhabitants of these harsh lands, and maybe it is appropriate that their Temple looks so isolated and forlorn. Short miles beyond the town sits the Ghostfence, that humming, imperfect barrier that seems to provide the Dunmer less shelter every day. What use is it when Blight rides in on the air? How do you build walls against dreams? The Tribunal's modest house of worship looks shuttered or derelict, with racers cavorting about over its roof. For a moment I ponder entering. The Balmora monk said my ancestors lay to the northeast of Balmora, and that's where we are, right? Or thereabouts. But I don't think my reception would be as warm this time. Already I suspect that my guide was not an orthodox monk, but rather some devotee of the Temple's less conventional orders. He seemed half an Armiger, to me.

The ash has ceased to bother me; I must be growing more Dunmeri by the day. I stand to gawk at Ald Skar for several minutes, but to be a tourist in Ald'ruhn is inexcusable. My restlessness takes over, and I end up pacing the insides of the walls of this town that is so fascinating in its deserted, inhospitable meanness. As the wind slackens, I notice a procession exiting the Temple, a sort of parade in traveling clothes. They have no baggage, bearing only banners and censers, so I guess that it is a ritual visit to the Ghostfence. I follow several dozen paces behind, trying to look pious and un-banditlike with my spear. If there's time in the afternoon, I will see about getting a mount installed for the blade. I can't fasten the hilt as securely as Todwendy can, not with just leather straps. I really wish she wasn't bound for Colovia.

The thought hits me, so very belated. Colovia is, in fact, a part of Cyrodiil, however loosely. Todwendy has already risked life and limb and expended gold on my account, might she also be willing to take me with her... home? The prospect leaves me breathless until I slow to a crawl and the pilgrims draw nearly out of sight ahead. Surely, there are rational concerns to weigh, factors in favor and opposed, but it proves exceedingly difficult to arrive at them. Her and I, on a ship. Nibennium, land and language I know. If there is an evening strider to Balmora, she will certainly still be at the Lucky

Lockup.

At the same time, though, do I want to cut and run? Wait, run from what? Do I have anything here, besides a tenuous association with... the Blades? Why is that so hard to walk away from? And yet, it is. In Nibennium I would face the same dilemma of survival all over again, assuming my fellow orphans have not met with sudden success. I would have Todwendy, but will she really suffer me as a hanger-on, attempting unsteadily to follow her trade? The gap between us less than it was several short days ago, but has she ever mentioned anything other than my ability to make my own way *here*, without her?

In the end, it's the distant, throaty throb that puts this episode of indecision to rest, at least for the moment. The Ghostfence has crept up on me despite my glacial pace, and the Temple folks have cast themselves down into the ash of the ravine before it, in a variety of supplicatory poses. It's not a wall; it's a piece of a blue sky brought down to the stormy ashlands, shot through with wisps of white cloud. A child's summer dream in Mournhold, humming there cutting the valleys and ridges in two. Only after the initial sighting do you recognize the immense pillars, great constructions of ageless Velothi stone, carved with netch-sized sculptures of the Three. The spirit walls extend downwards into the ground, perfect incorporeal planes that adhere—or perhaps hang from—the arcing, ropelike masonry bands strung between towers. Each of the soaring pylons bellows, an echo of the million voices of the million ancestral souls contained within, and the foghorn constructions on either side spew steam. Most of the water vapor evaporates before reaching the ground, but where the ridgelines rear up, the pilgrims can stand in a vanishing cascade of holy spittle and venerate it all.

I never did approach the group, instead walking back to Ald'ruhn ahead of it. On three separate occasions, blighted cliffracers crossed over from the Red Mountain side and tried for a chunk of faithful Velothi flesh. The Temple errants fended them off ably, and I stuck considerably closer from then on. Once back in town, I decided that the Fighters Guild (this chapter is supposed to be the honest one, after all) was worth my custom. Their poleturner attached my the shortsword more securely to the staff (thankfully not paralyzing himself on the business end), and I bought a more pedestrian dagger as a replacement sidearm. He also referred me to an independent Balmora smith who could forge an easily removable mount out of metal.

The evening meal finds me in the lower common room of the Ald Skar Inn. My thoughts on Todwendy's departure are no more developed than they were before, but I know for sure that I am not going to be getting on a strider tonight. There is work to do. When Hassour enters the room, his table set for him in advance, I do not need anyone to point him out for me. Who else could look so entirely an ashlander, while dressed in Velothi traveling gear and sumptuous garments of a successful caravan merchant? His whole bearing, mohawk on down, has both the austere haughtiness of a nomad patriarch and the commanding self-assurance of a man who has made himself wealthy. I count off the minutes as he composes himself for dinner, and move towards his table as he waits for service.

“Your pardon, master, but I knew no other way to approach you. Might I have your ear?” I can address a Dunmer (sort of), and I can address a man of high station, but neither really fits here.

“You might have waited until after I have eaten, for one. Is your business urgent?”

“My master is anxious for my return, yes. My name is Naleva of Polefel.”

“May you bless and be blessed. Tell me of your business, and perhaps we will deal after dinner.”

“In truth, I have an unusual request. I wish to learn of manners and politeness among the ashlanders, how to approach in the proper fashion. And some simple questions concerning their beliefs.”

“I see. An intriguing object, albeit one that cannot profit me.” He glances over his shoulder, but the opening courses have still not arrived. “Very well, Naleva of Polefel, you shall learn by doing. The most crucial aspect in opening discussion with an ashlander is the giving of gifts.”

He meets my eyes with a piercing gaze, and I motion for him to continue.

"A gift is a sign of courtesy among strangers, and affection among friends. Among strangers, a thoughtful gift is a sign that you are cautious, and considerate, and aware of the other's wants and needs. Among friends, it is a private thing, and subtle, with great risks, for the test of the gift is how well it is tailored to the receiver. Therefore, Naleva, why not leave me in peace while I eat my dinner, and favor me with a gift when you return. Then we shall discuss whatever it is you seek."

He turns away, hands folded beneath his chin. I nod and retreat upstairs. A small bribe to the secures a suggestion from the skeptical barkeep and I returned with a newly-purchased compilation of ashlander poetry. His meal long done, Hassour sits reclined in the same common room, smoking a pipe in High Rock fashion.

"I laud your taste, Naleva of Polefel, be it by instinct alone or not." He flips through the thin volume with practiced fingers, arriving at a page near the end. "Here. One of my favorites, from the wise women of the Urshilaku." He pushes the book across the table towards me. "Read it aloud, if you would."

I hesitate. The room has gone quite quiet and the poetry is not in Dunmeris, so that excuse won't work. Is Blades work always this unpleasant?

"Rise from darkness, Red Mountain!
Spread your dark clouds and green vapors!
Birth earthquakes, shatter stones!
Feed the winds with fire!
Flay the tents of the tribes from the land!
Feed the burned earth with our souls!
Yet never shall you have your rule over me.
Never shall I tremble or flinch from your power.
Never shall I yield my home and hearth.
And from my tears shall spring forth
The flowers of grassland springs."

After the close of that eternity of recitation, Hassour leans back in his seat and takes a long drag on the cigar. I swear I saw smoke come out of his ears.

"Your voice rings true, Naleva, wherever that face of yours may be from. I would make a mirroring gift to you, in the form of another book, if culture could be taught in such ways."

"Your knowledge will be gift enough."

"And the knowledge you seek is the most difficult to transmit. I will stick to the basics. You intend to go among the tribes quite soon?"

"I..." Somehow this hasn't occurred to me yet. "Yes." My reaction warrants a skeptical grunt.

"You have already taken part in the custom of gifts. In the future, eschew such poetry and stick to useful items. Tools and weapons. My people have never loved the written word, and I lament their ignorant scorn for such common yet potent magic. Things of beauty may sometimes please them, but only for the sake of its natural origin and display of cunning craftsmanship. A bauble you purchase at a Balmora jeweler's may be met with scorn and soon traded away. If trade is your object, however, gold is an acceptable offering for a like-minded tribesman."

He gestures for another cup and pours from the bottle at his elbow. To my surprise, fine Cyrodiilic brandy, the likes of which I scarcely tasted in the province itself.

"Never enter a yurt or village without invitation. To do so is to invite a challenge. One crucial distinction foreigners must attempt to make is between a challenge for sport and a challenge for honor. Many warriors hide their emotions, and the context may not always make it clear. It is acceptable to decline a sparring match, but shrink from a challenge to your honor and no member of that tribe will deal with you in honesty or respect again. Your gender may provide some protection here, but women

challenge as well.”

“And thanks be for that. From what I hear, a duel with an ashlander would be injurious to my health.”

He seems to examine my words for flattery.

“True enough. The single greatest obstacle to dealings with the tribes is their general hostility. Most ashlanders wish all the foreigners and their false gods could be driven from Morrowind. Failing that, they at least wish the foreign devils would leave them in peace. It shameful to attack unarmed persons, but Ashlanders reserve the right to raid the settled people, and kill without hesitation anyone who offends them or their clan laws. No ashlander is fool enough to make war against the Empire, but if such a war might be won, many might cheerfully give their lives to win such a war.”

He motions for me to drink more, and I take the opportunity to cut in.

“That is all valuable insight, but not all my questions are so general. Specifically, I was hoping you could tell me about the Nerevarine cult.”

“Ah. Now there's a subject. Is your employer merely curious, or flirting with illegality? Not even the Empire tolerates that old superstition, you know.”

“So I have heard.”

“Well then, all ashlanders are born into an Ancestor cult, and the anticipation of the Nerevarine carries on in addition to that faith. It is a very small cult, headed by a very few wise women with the gift of prophecy, and some warrior-heroes who guard and protect the seers.”

I sip the brandy to spur him on.

“The cult has not been influential for many generations, and will certainly continue to decline if Peakstar is truly dead. Although most ashlanders share the sentiments of the prophecies, they think little of their promises and validity. Really, only the Urshilaku keep the faith nowadays.”

“Is that a tribe?”

“Of the northwestern ashlands, and once of the entire West Gash.” What is it on his face? Anger? Wry wistfulness? “The Urshilaku play host to the last oracle of the prophecies, Nibani Maesa. Their Ashkhan is Sul-Matuul, a well-respected leader who doubles as Warrior-Protector of the cult.”

“And would you know where to find the Urshilaku?”

He gazes at me in curiosity, and I crack a guilty smile despite myself. Heady stuff, this flin.

“I hope you will share your object, one day, for it is a fascinating errand your master sets you. The Urshilaku move with the herds, of course, but usually their camp lies close to the Sea of Ghosts. I could send word to your master next time I hear of their location, if he can be relied upon to pay the messenger.”

“I would receive your messenger, and pay gladly.”

That concluded our official business, but the conversation went on for some time. Hassour urged more brandy on me, eventually presenting a whole variety of Cyrodilic vintages with informed commentary and attentive examination of my reactions. He spent a good deal of money that night, and if I have little to report about our conversation, it is because I remember little of it. It was the first time that I had actually been well and truly drunk in Vvardenfell (have *that*, Todwendy!), and I only vaguely recall the stories of his ashlander days, the nobility of their customs, his trading practices and his son (it was the only the brandy that made me look like a good bride for his heir, I'm sure).

Normally when I'm sleeping it off, I never dream. Not so, that night. The gold mask returns, no longer a shimmering outline but a fully-formed vision of complete clarity. He is more real in the dream than anything that can be seen in the waking world. The usual shifting environment of the dream is gone, presenting my visitor at a distance, and yet he filled up the entirety of the dreamspace, shutting out all else with his bulk. I almost didn't record his words. After all, what can the mere transcription possibly convey? What use is such shallow reduction and what can one say about such things? But I was urged, so here it is.

"Lord Nerevar Indoril, Hai Resdaynia! Long forgotten, forged anew! Three belied you, three

betrayed you! One you betrayed was three times true! Lord Voryn Dagoth, steadfast liegeman, faithful friend, bids you come and climb Red Mountain! Beneath Red Mountain, once again, break your bonds, shed cursed skin, and purge the n'wah from Morrowind!"

The thing about that vision was that it recalled another, something that had been lost in the overload and anxiety of my arrival in Vvardenfell, and had never truly breached the walls of sleep and waking to begin with. I wrote it down at the start of this memoir, the exact words that returned to me so belatedly, though with no mention of the voice that spoke them. I lay in a shifting pale approximation of sleep after that, waking in the early morning without the head-pounding I richly deserved. The equally indomitable Hassour had already gone to the caravanserai, a groggy barmaid explained, so I stumbled out into the morning's fiery orange sun. All Skar was lit up by rays shooting through the remnants of predawn mist, and I stumbled slightly, turning to gawk at the massive stretch of shell, wider than the Foreign Quarter. Hassour was overseeing the preparation of pack guar when I entered, and greeted me with that Dunmeri warmth that so quickly follows hostility and suspicion. I rushed through the pleasantries.

"Hassour Zainsubani, might I beg your counsel a final time, in private? It will be brief."

He hesitates, fixing an underling with a stern glare until an answering gesture seems to satisfy him. We head outside to stand sheltered by an awning, amid the noise of livestock.

"What troubles you, Naleva of Polefel?"

"'Trouble' is the proper word, I fear. I could expect a judicious answer only from someone of your experiences." That's mostly true. "I have been dreaming."

He narrows his eyes.

"Surely you must mean something specifically... unusual by that."

"They are dreams *of* this place, only since I arrived, and they recur, showing me things I could not have known."

"Wise women are dream-seers, but it is not a gift likely to be found elsewhere." Except for every holy man on the street in Nibennium, that is. "And then there are the dream-sendings of the Sharmat, that drive the weak to madness and self-mutilation. Have you gained useful knowledge from these dreams, or have they affected your waking mind?"

"Not as such. The Sharmat, he is—"

"Dagoth Ur, scourge of all who walk the wastes."

"And he spreads his totems, and his dream with them," I murmur. "I dreamt in verse. I am called to Red Mountain by Voryn Dagoth, to shed cursed skin and drive the n'wah from Resdayn."

His nostrils flare at the words.

"It is not a dream of madness, thank the Three." Which three, I wonder. "It is a test, of the sort often sent to warriors in the Ashlands. Dagoth Ur wants you for his own. He recognizes you as Dunmer, curiously enough, and invites you to join him in expelling the n'wah, the outlanders and slaves."

"Rather optimistic, isn't he?"

"Do not trifle with these matters, Naleva. His persuasion can take less resistible forms."

A horn sounds from the lead of the caravan, now assembled.

"One more question," I spit out. He readies himself to leave, but with a cocked ear. "Dawn and dusk."

"The sign of Azura, what of it?"

"I saw that too."

"You saw a rising sun and a setting sun in a dream? Not terribly unusual, and I wonder how the sleeping mind can tell the difference."

"I saw both at once, and not visually. I just knew the sign."

"Then perhaps you have the good dreams with the bad. Keep the faith until we meet again, Naleva Polefel, and guard your soul from the sickness of the mountain. It is the sort of affliction that

makes me fear so for my son.”

“My deepest thanks, Hassour Zainsubani. May you walk in sight of the ancestors.”

“And may you find yours.” His echo of the Balmora monk leaves me stunned, and he strides away in the interim. I'll just have to wonder what he would have thought about Dagoth's form of address.

Silt striders lull you to sleep with the gentle sloshing movement of their gait. I spent the return journey from Ald'ruhn dreading the arrival of another dream, and stared out at the West Gash so intently that my eyes were still stinging on arrival at Caius' house. Didn't fall asleep, though. My entrance that afternoon was the most hesitant since the first visit. For several minutes I sat on his lower roof steps, rolling pebbles around on the mudbrick stoop. Once inside, I found the master of the Blades dressed almost decorously, his bedding free of Blight corpses and cleaned spotlessly.

“Good day, Naleva. Report, if you please.”

“Nothing in writing this time, but I have a lock on the current location of the Urshilaku tribe, the foremost followers of the Nerevarine cult.”

He tucks a short missive into a pocket somewhere and moves towards the lockbox under his bed, speaking as he does so.

“Your work is immaculate as always. Such competence greatly assuages my general incredulity where your case is concerned. If any of my agents distrust you as much as Nine-Toes the other day, you can tell them that I've promoted you to Journeyman.”

“Er, thanks. Incredulity, you say?” That little strongbox has one hell of a complex lock, but he soon returns to the table with a short stack of papers.

“Have a seat. It is time for you to know everything I do.” He passes a hand over his eyes and forehead, as if the act of divulging information brings on a headache. “You were released from prison on the highest authority, as I have said.”

“And arrested on the lowest.”

“Be that as it may, your presence in Imperial custody brought you to the attention of... it is difficult to do the particulars of this justice, the Emperor's privy council. The details of your background were verified by... divine means, and you were sent to Vvardenfell in the hopes that you would cooperate with the Blades without any explanations that would give away state secrets. You were not the first sent, but you were the first to cooperate, and the first who was not a pureblood Dunmer.”

“Glad I could be such a servile tool.”

“Stay serious, if you please. From now on you are useless to us except as a free woman. You have taken no oaths for a reason.”

“I will stay serious when you emerge from your cryptic habits.” He meets my eyes at that, betraying something like amusement.

“Fair enough. The Emperor was advised by his Moth Priest seers that an orphaned prisoner—you—had the appearance of satisfying the conditions of the Nerevarine prophecies. The *appearance*. I cannot stress that enough. It's all in the decoded version of the package you brought me.” He pushes the documents across the table. “At first I thought the Empire simply intended for me to create a convincing impostor, but your findings leave me less sure.”

He searches my face, which I knew remained perfectly impassive. There is nothing but an immense stillness in my mind, although I know that the disbelief must be seething, somewhere down out of sight with a lid on. I collect the papers.

“The dictates of secrecy become more severe now. We do not need another Peakstar who is an Imperial spy to boot.”

“What happens next?”

“You read those papers, at length, somewhere you can wrap your mind around the extent of this, and then burn them. After that, surely you can guess.”

“Urshilaku.”

“Yes. Meet with these ashlanders and have them test you against the prophecies. Your experience on this point now equals my own, so I have little in the way of guidance for you henceforth. The path is your own.” Just then I notice a handwritten copy of the Stranger on the table, well-worn with repeated folding and various stains. He meets my eyes with a level gaze, those flinty irises and cutting brows for the first time simple and unguarded. Cosades is too long and deep in his role to *show* anything in his face, but for the first time the guardedness falls away, and with it the relation of spymaster and informant. I do as I am silently bidden, tucking away the decoded missive and taking most of my stored earnings away with me.

I walked up the slope behind the house, continuing until the point where the wall disappeared into the outcropping. Continuing on atop the wall, drawing glances from the Hlaalu patrolmen below, I paused on the slight arch over the Odai. Looking north towards the yellow-green of the West Gash, with Red Mountain's angry peek just showing beyond, I read. By some miracle, none of the pages blew Imperial secrets away in the wind.

Spymaster Caius Cosades

Knight-Errant of the Imperial Order of Blades

Director of Imperial Intelligence in Vvardenfell District, Eastern Provinces

I have the honor to acquaint you with his Majesty's wishes concerning one Naleva S, Nibennium resident and individual of no rank or consequence.

True enough, that. It goes on much as Caius said it would, about the prophecies and my orphanage. The language is bureaucratic excellence, impeccably formal yet gently chiding Caius not to scoff at such 'ancient superstitions' in tones both obscure and familiar. I almost smile at how the letter prompts him to open new inquiries into the Nerevarine cult (references to the threat of the Sixth House are highly oblique) without preconceptions or biased sources. Only once does the paper swim before my eyes, when the cautious diction of Glabrio Bellienus, Personal Secretary to the Emperor broaches the topic of the moth priests. I had recognized the one at my interrogation, but most of his ilk are simple ancestor worshipers and animal magicians, raising funds by providing noble Nibenese families with silks. Here, though, the words 'dreamsleeve intercept' stand out, suggesting that the Emperor's most anointed seers plucked me from prison, perhaps after consulting the Elder Scrolls themselves. Can Dagoth Ur and Uriel Septim both be wrong? Peakstar, how I'd like to meet you, now that you're surely dead. How is Mehra Milo doing, I wonder?

With evening approaching, the watch have lit the braziers at the wall's west end. I drop the papers into the flames, pausing to warm my hands (although the dusk is balmy) until every fragment is consumed. The warmth stays with me on the way past the noisy cornerclubs beneath hightown, the guilds, the plaza, all the way to the Lucky Lockup with its welcome drafts.

“Naleva?”

I realize that I have been staring through Todwendy's welcoming face, right into the wall behind her head. My eyes snap back into the proper plane.

“Oh! Hello—sorry.”

“You look your favorite pet insect just died.”

“Hmm.” I don't notice the Dunmer joke for a number of minutes.

“Need a drink?” She takes my silence as affirmative, and steers me to a table. “As you know, I

am leaving tomorrow.” She grins. “In the morning.” Is that a tease? I scowl. “Strider to Ebonheart, then a boat to the *other* Ebonheart. And bumpy roads all the way to Cheydinhal. Don't know why the damned Houses won't let the Imperials build half-decent roads.”

“That's the route I came in by, pretty much.”

“She speaks! What has got into that greyish head of yours?”

“Just some interesting news. I think I'm headed north.”

“Good! So you won't be moping around here without me.” She slaps a piece of fabric on the table, embroidered with the sigil of House Hlaalu and guaranteeing her passage to Cyrodiil. There is a bit of compulsion, located somewhere around my stomach, trying to drag myself onto that ship with her, and escape. Free again, to whatever end. But the rest of me knows perfectly well that I am staying right here. There is no walking away from this, whatever exactly it means to me.

Todwendy leans forward suddenly and picks a piece of charred paper from my lapel.

“Been burning bridges?” She chuckles and flicks it back towards me. Thank the divines, it's only the letters E and N. “Say, that boss of yours isn't sending you on more suicide errands, is he? You don't seem too pleased with going north.”

“No.” My voice is level and steady and surprises me. “I will be just fine from now on.”

She looks at me for a moment and then raises her cup.

“Let's drink to that. You know it's the truth, to. You can kill anyone you want, if you get the jump on them with that knockout stick of yours. Or just slit their hamstring and run away.” A pause, cup still suspended. “Do try and not to kill too many people, Naleva. It makes a person worse company.”

“And will we share our company in the future?”

“Of course! May we meet again.”

“May we meet again.”

After that it was time to get far more drunk than I ever was with Hassour, spending rather too much of Caius' coin in the process. But I decided that Todwendy has expended too much of her own on my account. Chuna will be mortified that he missed it.

She even said she wanted to verify something, around the end of the night, and kissed me, just once. Her lips were rum and midsummer.

Maar Gan. Somewhere, this is an egg town, no less than Gnisis, but it looks more a fortress. There could be a mine underneath the circling bluffs and the walls that press in close, picking their way through the boulders. Outwardly, however, there is nothing here but House Redoran, its outpost and the shrine to Vivec's so-and-so martial-poetic deed. Having received Hassour's messenger, I made for Ald'ruhn on the daily strider (had to pay half a mint to get a square foot of space on that one), and then switched to the Maar Gan mail bug as an ashstorm came down. The mountain wind hasn't stopped since, only increasing in volume on our way north. It slanted in as if dumping off the edge of the Ghostfence, whipping through the battered netcbag canvas covering the cockpit. I should mention that Nine-Toes caught me before departing Balmora, giving me the name of an ashlands guide (Nuleno Tedas) and an Almsivi Intervention scroll. The kresh cloth document seems unconvincing, even threatening with its daedric script stained into the fibers, but in essence it is no different than my staff. It is pregnant with the spell, promising me instant, miraculous travel to the nearest Almsivi temple, just as advertised. In addition, I brought the ash statue along, on something like a whim.

The six-legged mount shudders as it stoops down towards the dock ramp, fatigued by the short day's stride. I decide that a glance at a provincial map like Caius' misleads more than it illuminates, as the distance from Ald'ruhn to Maar Gan is less than that of my noon-to-midnight stroll to Balmora from the sea. It's never the distance on this island that matters, but the terrain, and its threshold of traveler's

death. The foot journey ahead of me to the Urshilaku looks more daunting by the minute, so draining was the strider ride in comfortable repose.

“Dead right, it's a rough walk,” says Nuleno Tedas. Deep in the airless, grit-covered Redoran outpost building, my guide crouches over her wastes gear, treating it with various mire oils and scribe gland extracts. “Not just bumps and straight up-down crags, but you've got Bani-Dad square in the way there, from Ghostfence to the seamouth.”

“That the foyada?”

“Sure.” She talks like a Hlaalu, this one. But a country Hlaalu, Bitter Coast, maybe, with her vowels tuned to Colovian perfection. “But you won't be seeing any of it, dressed as you are. Those aren't ashlands clothes, and I don't see any baggage behind you there.”

“I assume I'll be able to buy suitable gear here.”

“Suppose that's so. Your friends paid well for no-questions-asked, but you sure do make it hard. This isn't really a pedestrian undertaking, you know. Should have gone to Gnisys for guar and brought them here.”

I collapse onto the sleeping pad in the corner of the bean-shaped room.

“Would have taken too long. Besides, I hear it's a little different from riding a horse.”

“True enough. But lemme tell you, Naleva Polefel, it's been blowing Blight for a week now, like some damned blood avalanche off those southeastern ridges there, and I don't like the idea of us two alone out there, and you a novice. You can't count on the food when it's storming, except what you carry, and plenty of ways to delay you 'til your soul crops up in Azura's birdbath.”

“I heard you could make it to the north coast in a full day.”

“In *good* weather. All this mess can triple or quadruple the time. Your sponsor might've checked the air and noticed that the mountain has been stripping the skin off our noses from here to Molag Mar. Every now and then the Sharmat goes on a bender, but this one's a doozie.”

“The Sharmat makes the mountain wind?”

She shrugs.

“Maybe so. I think he makes it belch like this. Anyhow, the only reason I think you've got a chance is because the north coast is the one place that's likely to be quiet. The ash streams've been bouncy these past years, and the real hard blows tend to miss the lowlands. Even some of that hellscape Molag Mar gets a pass these days.”

“So. Are we off to market, then?”

She grins, a kindly sort of derision.

“What market? You'll have to pry it off someone's back.”

“You are going to show me what I need, though.” The question fades into assertion halfway through. Nuleno Tedas gives out a throaty sigh and shifts the glistening netch leather jerkin from her lap. Through the thick, earthen walls, the wind is an anxious fingertapping, strengthening throughout our ascent into the scathing gale in the town's plaza. It doesn't take twenty paces before I'm ready to quit.

Swaddled, that's the word. An eternity of scraping and tying and layering, until I'm standing at the door of the outpost with these strange garments pressing on my armpits. They came not only dear, but dirty, and Nuleno Tedas seemed incapable of distinguishing between instruction on properly cleaning and maintaining them, and the effrontery of doing it herself as my laundress. But here I am, swaddled in nomad's undergarments, cloying ashmire grit, airtight gloves and a netch leather hauberk that is more like armor than anything I thought I'd ever wear. My new boots are lined with netchbag and the outside world seems far away now, having retreated to arms' length beyond my ashlands accoutrements. Blame the helmet for that, a demonically-shaped piece of cunningly-welded chitin, like

unsavory ivory. 'This is most important,' the guide said, ramming it down on my shoulders and sealing the gap. Gods, it stinks in here, but the scarf and goggles will keep out the ash for sure. I wish there was a wash basin or mirror (ha!) around here to see myself in. Long way to Polefel, sister.

The goggle lenses aren't glass but the same sort of green-tinted resin as most of the doorside windows here. *Loud*, the blowing mountain crystals are against them, and it's the first thing I notice as we step out into the storm-stifled dawn. Nuleno has provided packs, if nothing else, and mine is lighter than I had feared. She removed an appreciable amount of gear when I revealed the intervention scroll, and seems much happier knowing that she needn't drag my clumsy n'wah ass from a ravine with broken legs. Hermy only knows how you live in all this without the Blades backing you up.

If you pressed me, I would compare it to walking in winter (Gallenus once decided that the temperate Cheydinhal highlands weren't enough for us balmy Rumare children, and took us to the Jeralls). The clothing restricts breathing and movement in the same way; the footing is as treacherous as a layer of ice and slush. It demands that same measured, dogged pace and artificial composure to keep your outfit intact, impermeable to the elements. And while heavy snow is taxing and icy winds can bite deep, Cyrodilic winter has nothing on the holistic, malevolent onslaught of a good Red Mountain belch. The wind doesn't come in discrete gusts but as a steady, self-sustaining force, exerting pressure on each step until your knees creak with the ache of resisting it in every small movement. The ashlands are rarely cold except on still nights, but in your carapace of animal parts you sweat, and it turns to vapor in the confined environment. Soon your goggles fog (the leading cause of disorientation and thus death, Nuleno says, so stick to foyadas), but at least the moisture softens the rasp of the ash particles that work their way through the cunningly-constructed seams of even the best Dunmeri garments at a rate of several dozen per hour. 'And this all with full coverage helmets and not an inch of exposed skin,' Nuleno lectures from her black wraparound mask. 'If we see any ashlanders, I bet some of them have open-faced helms and bare forearms. Now off with us, and remember, you don't eat, drink or piss for ten miles.'

That was possibly five miles ago, but who can really tell? The ashlands seem to glow, producing this grim, red ochre that makes Nuleno seem concerned even behind her mirrored black eyepieces. She offers me the charm again, to ward off Blight. Some sort of tooth made into an amulet, she had refused me it before we left, saying that it would be useless without also having an ancestor guardian about my neck. Damn outlanders. (I felt no enchantment in it, which means that the function is religious). I have no disease-fighting tonics with me, and Nuleno feels no need to share when I can disappear at will. Perhaps a touch more preparation would have been worth the delay. Caius' orders aren't terribly urgent, after all. Some nice, reliable guar with strong legs and sunny dispositions, saddlebags stuffed with hackle-lo...

Here we are, though, our pace faltering by the minute. We clamber up a short rise, and Nuleno draws close, as if for a kiss, to bellow into my helmet.

"Foyada Bani-Dad! From here the wind is at our backs! May it speed you!"

This ravine looks the same as the path from Maar Gan, if a little crueller still. Once you discern the straightness of it (assuming your goggles still admit light, and display colors other than red) and the compact soil welcomes your feet, however, the foyada makes itself plain. Less trees than Mamaea, and the tailwind does make a difference, so the next hour's journey is almost a relief.

"Many flows here. The Ghostfence stops souls, not running bloodrock."

Uh.

Minutes after she says this, the ground shudders. The wind has only increased, redoubling at our backs, so for a moment I think that a gust has simply staggered me. Nuleno, however, throws herself to the ground and presses the iron rim of her goggles to the smooth volcanic stone of the foyada floor. I can feel only the occasional vibration through my boots, but the ashlands guide is reading the earth like the scroll I very much wish to be reading right now.

"The Scarab wakes!" She clutches her neck as if to feel the Blight charm through chitin and

hide. "Eruptions often follow."

"Will there be fire here?"

"Hard to say. It is a weak tremor, so maybe only Ashur-Dan will fill. No fire, and the storm still worsens." I whip around, staring at the grim walls of the ravine. No worse than a Nibenean riverbank, with no mud and a bit of tough hanging scathecraw here and there... Nuleno seems to sense my intentions.

"We don't have time to wait and see. We could make for Shishi, an old Velothi tower whose ledge has never burned. We may have to share it, but hospitality is sacred in a storm."

"How far is it?"

She slaps the hard earth in response.

"No, Naleva Polefel, on second thought we must turn back. Red Mountain's issue runs faster than hearing. With our backs turned and the storm loud and obscuring, we would burn before we knew it was coming. Heading up-foyada, though, we will have time to seek high ground."

I had been convinced well before that argument, and was in fact anxious for her to cease her explanations and move. I did not even think to feel frustration until we turned defeated into the head-on force of the ashstorm. Mere minutes into that barrage and I half-preferred to chance the lava. Such brute power in the air meant that the wind pushed through the neck seam and penetrated the helmet and lower garments when I did not hold my head at the proper, uncomfortable angle. The slender staff on my back became suddenly as a sail, a lever cranking back in an attempt to fling me down-foyada. The damned valley itself focused the wind at the bottom of it, collecting all the largest and heaviest debris to barrel along the floor. At one point a meteoric pebbled slammed into my right goggle lens, leaving a spiderweb crack in the resin.

Then came the racers. First I thought the storm was driving them, a trio of carrion beasts winging down the foyada towards us. Something in the timbre of their cries was different, though, and Nuleno drew her short javelin to stand legs asplay. The first of them arrived as I fumbled with my spear, ash pouring into my clothes through the gap beneath my helmet. With a *crack* that resounded about the foyada in defiance of the storm, Nuleno took a tail barb (a club, really) full in the center of her chitin breastplate. She staggered, but cunningly managed to tip her polearm skywards and tear a foot-long gash in the racer's wing membrane. The beast whipped noiselessly past the pair of us and crumpled into a rock face. Number two lined up the same crushing tail swing for me, and I deflected with the butt end of my staff, releasing the enchantment on impact (There is no technique to it, no delay or necessity to specify the exact conditions of discharge. The charm is simply a part of your consciousness.). The second racer dropped limply, skittering across the foyada floor to be skewered by Nuleno. Our last attacker zipped overhead to pounce on the racer that Nuleno had crippled and began gorging itself.

"Look, Naleva Polefel!"

Even with her broken spearpoint in its shoulder, the impaled racer crawled after us, squawking awfully. My guide pointed at its frothed lips and blood-encrusted eyes.

"Blight?"

"Else they would not have attacked so heedlessly. Let us hurry. A Blighted kagouti or guar may end us surely as the mountain itself."

The return journey took half again as long as our outward trek, with my ashlands suit admitting more and more of the Blight-laced mountain sediment. While we moved in peril of sudden fire, there was the onrushing distance to look at, scanning for a deeper, brighter glow. Reaching the southern turn-off, however, nothing could any longer distract me from the fact that every movement was painful. Eventually the jagged lining of my ash-encrusted clothes slowed our progress to a crawl. Nuleno's agitation was visible in the bearing of her back, never more than thirty paces ahead of me, but never less than ten.

By the time we won through to Maar Gan, ordinary fatigue had set in. I had given up trying to

hold the neck seam shut and let my head hang down. What could another half-pound of Blighted dust matter? In that drooping pose, the watchtowers drew directly overhead before I noticed them, and I collapsed across the threshold of the outpost building minutes later, helplessly relieved. A trio of Redoran scouts moved to lend a hand, but Nuleno waved them off.

"Nothing too serious," she belted out in West Gash dialect. "Just an overexcited outlander."

"I need these clothes off!" The helmet goes clattering to the floor in a rain of red sand.

"Let's get down below first." She kicks the door shut. "And first business after that is the temple, assuming you follow the Three. Otherwise, it's a hunnerd drakes for a Blight potion."

"I'll try... the temple. But first, *water*."

"You still have a full canteen, Naleva Polefel." I limp downstairs. The failed foray had been taxing to the both of us, but only I showed up any worse for it.

Sweet, sweet water. Or stale, acrid and full of minerals, to be honest, but sweet enough in the moment. I dump the last of it down the front of my shirt.

"Outlander! What are you doing?" Nuleno seems shocked.

"What anyone in their right mind would think to do." I cough painfully and begin shedding armor, trying not to look at the skin over my joints that has been scraped to the point of weeping blood. "Leave me alone, Nuleno, or tell me what we do at the temple."

"We enter a cleansing bath, and then pray for release from any of the Sharmat's contagion that has entered in us already. The first will do you good; for the second you may wish to recall someplace with a shrine to your nine saints."

Go eat a corpus cock, Nuleno Tedas.

"No scroll. I only have the one, and a temple altar recognized me once before." I teeter upright and climb up the stairs on all fours. She throws a robe up after me.

"This will serve to get us across the plaza. Careful on the steps."

"What is the plan now? I still need to reach the coast."

"Now, we wait for the storm to stop. And giving the mountain a few days to spill its fire and calm down would be wise. You can pay for lodging fairly cheaply."

The wind here now seems soft by comparison, and over short distances the robe pulled tight keeps the ash away. Up some steps and towards a temple unglimped until we rush inside, slamming the doors in haste. Dunmeri temples are seldom quiet. If the worshipers aren't making noise, then the ancestors are, so our clumsy entrance is unremarkable.

'Remarkable' does describe this shrine, however. Instead of a sulpit, the room centers around a horse-sized boulder, the sort of black, mottled rock you see in Molag Amur. Lounging atop it, in armor straight from a Battlespire tapestry, is a lanky figure with skin patterned black and red, like a festival-day Dunmer crossed with a war-painted orc, and the tusks moved to the forehead.

"Is that—"

"Dremora. Sent in homage by Mehrunes Dagon. The pilgrims taunt him as Lord Vivec did his master." Nuleno turns to the nearest priest and pays her dues. The daedroth and I stay locked in eye contact while she arranges the Blight bath. Something tells me there won't be water.

"Naleva Polefel." This cleric has himself a throat full of gravel, by the sound of it. If he has any opinion on my heritage, he keeps it to himself. "You may follow myself and Nuleno Tedas."

We make for the temple's lower level. The dremora continues to peer at me.

"No tits on this one," it grunts as we pass by. Neither the guide nor the priest seem to notice, so I hold my tongue.

"Will you need attendants?" We have entered a dimly light room suffused with an earthy fragrance. Burial urns placed around the perimeter of a large clay tub spit inquiring whispers at us.

"I'll do it myself. But the outlander here would honor you for the assistance."

The priest bows and departs.

"That thing looks like an ash mire," I nod at the deep basin tub, whose surface is encrusted with

dark residue.

“An astute guess. You're half right. Now strip.”

The robes hit the ground at the same time, but I falter after that, first to watch Nuleno's scarred, shell-like body shed its coverings, then to wince and slowly peel back the final layers of my own plastered garments. Half Cyrodiil, eighth Bosmer, whatever I am, my skin is a bright pink when you rip off the outer grey coating. I stand naked at the edge of the basin, covering the tangle of hair below my navel that grew during prison. I wonder if there is copper down...

“Get in,” Nuleno commands, palpably impatient to be done ushering me about. Right about now I would rather run upstairs without a stitch on than sit against that mire grime with my stinging back and buttocks. Nuleno guffaws at my hesitance. Have I failed some test during our false start in the foyada?

To my relief, the substance in the basin is damp and almost impossibly smooth, softer than any Dibellan oil. My nerves flare up momentarily, but after that the sensation is almost pleasant. A young man with shaved head and sleeveless tunic enters, bearing two bonemold buckets similar to the offering carapace of the Balmora monk.

“He is ritually blind for the cleansing,” Nuleno hurriedly supplies. She points out the ornate bracelets about his wrists. “He sees through his hands.”

The bath attendant sets both buckets on the rim of the tub and departs to fetch more. Nuleno peers into the vessel that contains water.

“The pastor honors us, providing this much.” She slaps my hand away as I reach for the heavensent substance.

This fellow truly is blind, threading his way towards us on a low ridge in the floor. Still not sure what 'seeing with his hands' is supposed to mean, though. Nuleno reaches down between my knees and pulls a brass plug from the floor. After a few seconds of gurgling, the hole fills with the unmistakable black ooze of an ash mire and begins to spout, filling the tube waist-deep. *Now* it stings, but the blind Dunmer holds my shoulders down, whispering prayers.

“Above us, Sharmat's curse, but the Three suffer not the Frame-Maker's issue to heed the will of the Unmourned.”

“It's heady stuff,” Nuleno explains, “and kills all sorts of diseases. Everything but itself. That's why you don't eat it.”

“Why the hell would you—”

The blind man suddenly slaps my back with an oil-soaked cloth, weighted at the end by some apple-sized insect gland wrapped in absorbent fabric. His seeing fingers trace the length of my spine, and the bracelets hum with enchantment too esoteric to divine. Nuleno meanwhile embarks on a more mundane variant of the same operation, scrubbing with slippery oils and sanctified rags.

“So is there any way of predicting the weather?” I try at conversation to distract myself from the male hands probing at my armpits and soaking my hair with harsh-smelling grit.

“Not a chance. These are tests of faith, not your fickle lake breezes.” A Dunmer that's heard of Rumare. Huh. “If you're blessed, you can hike up to the Ghostfence and ask your forefathers what's blowing at Ghostgate or anywhere else along the perimeter. That helps with a guess.”

“And there's no other way there? I can't commit to an open-ended stay here, especially when the foyada is so touch-and-go.”

“Well...” Nuleno leans back against the seat with a weary groan, letting volcanic slime run between her breasts. “There is the always the Khuul route, but I don't operate that far west.”

“Is it any easier?”

“No. Rougher terrain by far. Less time in the foyada with risk of getting burned or Blighted, maybe, but it's not a straight shot. There you'd actually need a guide to navigate, as opposed to this here stroll down past Shishi, Bthunthumz and Druscashti, and then the first eastern exit you see.”

The daunting names roll effortlessly off her tongue.

“Say I wanted to try it.”

“I'd say you end up dying of thirst in a crevasse halfway there, but alright. You know where Khuul is?”

Sort of.

“North coast, right?”

“Right, in the West Gash. It doesn't storm ash out there, and why? Because of the big old hills between it and Bani-Dad. The west wall of the foyada rises high, almost like Mamaea, so the mountain wind ramps up over the sweetlands and comes down out to sea instead.” She traces a map by painting her thigh with thick mire ooze. Meanwhile the attendant comes perilously close to 'seeing' too much. “If you were to head east out of Khuul, you would invariably hit the ridgeline. Follow that south, and eventually there is an obvious spur that lets you up into the hills. If you simply try to maintain that elevation for as long as you can without climbing, you will follow the peaks around towards the north. Then it's a very short cut across an ashlands dale—the northernmost extremity of the wastes this side of Bani-Dad and Mamaea—and you'll be up at the foyada pass. You will have bypassed four-fifths of our foyada journey, and be right near the east turning to the coastal plain. Do you have a compass?”

“No.” And with no ancestor guardian amulet, I can't ask it for the direction of the family burial, either.

“Buy one in Khuul, and I will give you landmarks and headings.” Nuleno has already been paid, and I can tell that she is anxious to be rid of me.

“Is this a single day's trip?”

“That would be optimistic even for an ashlander scout. There should be shelter in the lowlands just short of the foyada. Hiring another scout would be best, though.”

Nuleno begins washing away the oil and grime, daubing at her skin with sparing amounts of water. The attendant does the same for me, removing most of the stuff but leaving a distinct stain behind. Some Dunmer must go months like this, and in armor to boot.

“If the weather doesn't break tomorrow, I'll make for Khuul. This place is a lot to take at once, novice that I am.”

“Outlander that you are.”

“Am I likely to find a guide in Khuul?”

“Not that I know of. It's all fishermen and egg farmers there, with a tradehouse full of n'wah.” How is it that bathing seems to have made her mood worse?

The attendant stands me up with his seeing hands. And may Mara blush, priests here must have the same exemptions as healers in Cryodiil, because he completes his task as shamelessly as any Dibellan Sigh Acolyte.

“Is there a strider to Khuul?”

“To Gnisis tomorrow. After a fashion. You can pay to ride second saddle on a guar caravan, and they will intercept it on the way north from Ald'ruhn. If there's no room, you'll come back here.” Telling this to my ash-dripping nakedness seems to have reminded Nuleno of her superiority and improved her mood. “Don't let them gouge you for the fare. Gnisis has a Legion fort, so the Imps pay half the travel fees.”

“I'll rent a bed here and be off in the morning, then.”

“Just sleep at my lodgings, Naleva Polefel.” Nuleno yawns cavernously.

“And how can I wash the ash out of my clothes?”

“You hang the undergarments and beat them with a stick. Ask to buy some Mazte dregs to soak the more intimate pieces. As for outerwear, guar urine will do.”

She seems taken aback at my revulsion, assuring me that it is nothing like the foul-smelling piss of your perfidious Western nags.

A prayer to Mercy, Mystery and Mastery came next, all couched in terms begging deliverance from the Blight. Prostrate before the monoliths upstairs, the Tribunal healed my (potential) affliction

even as my errand to the Urshilaku marked me as a definitive heretic. An insane heretic as well, although who among us, from Vivec and Dagoth Ur to Uriel Septim, is farthest along the golden path, only Hermy Mora can tell.

That question sticks with me all the way through the misty pre-dawn caravan ride to meet the Gnosis strider. With my green traveling coat stained dark by guar piss (though I swear by Talos' goatee, the stuff works), Lord Indoril Nerevar bedevils me. The idea of his old soul come again doesn't seem to fit with Dunmeri ancestor worship. Shouldn't his spirit still be stalking the halls of some Great House crypt, after all? What good is a saint that gives up the ghost (literally) and goes to live in some mortal? Maybe (well, definitely) the ashlanders see things differently.

Dagoth's address left me shaken, but all speak of his cunning and deceit. What better way to snare a prideful tribesman, after all, than to name him Great Nerevar? Then the corpus and the ripping out of faces. Was the vision somehow generic? He did not call me by given name, which is Dunmeri enough. Did I sleep near an ash figurine during each dream before the final one? Perhaps that is the most sobering thought in all this.

The endpoint of the Maar Gan convoy is in fact a small trade depot. It turns out that only three of the worryingly large complement seeks passage to Gnosis. The rest simply aim to stock goods and await the cargo strider of coming days. We sit in early morning silence while the sun lights up the fog obscuring Caldera, a chill in-between hour that could be anywhere in Tamriel if you squint just right. The West Gash is a beautiful garden after two days in the wastes, truly deserving of the name sweetlands. The hardy grass and scrubby trees here accept the occasional fall of ash with impassive grace, taking its potency into the soil for next spring's bloom. Vvardenfell has fewer seasons than even Nibenay, with only the timbre of the wind and the tint of the sweetlands vegetation to distinguish them. I am told, however, that the deaths of emperor parasols only occur in winter, and their thunderous fall is always marked by sadness, for only beneath a lake of fire can their ancient seeds germinate, and rise again.

Nerevar, though. Up on the strider he still harries me, making conversation with the jocular Hlaalu difficult. The more I probe this land and its history, the less fantastic the idea seems. Wholly without convincing me, of course. His cult has survived millennia in the face of Temple repression, and the failures of (how many?) False Incarnates. His promises speak to the betrayals of the First Council era. Of the Chimer by House Dagoth, of the nomadic by the settled. Of the Daedric Anticipations, perhaps even of Nerevar himself. His stirrings are the unfinished business of the Red Mountain war, the history the Three have been unable to live down. Nerevar at his most difficult is an ashlander hero, meant to venerate alien customs and then drive the outlanders from Resdayn. How the hell can the Empire credit that? They must not. And he was no ashlander but a House noble, was he not? Mehra Milo's friends would know what his return might mean to the settled Dunmer.

In the end, though, my ponderings arrive at the same final conclusion. The prophecy speaks of a stranger, but the idea is entirely too strange. I, Naleva, Gallenus' waterfront brat, issue of dampest Nibennium, CiCi born and bred on the wrong side of Dumereth, incarnation of Nerevar. The gender isn't the sticking point (although for sure, it doesn't help); the ashlanders had Peakstar, after all. It's the other part, where the prophecy purports to fit *me*. An orphan with my birthsign? There's thousands of us, several even in Gallenus' outfit! For reasons that need not be enumerated, the whole supposition is ridiculous. Dagoth's ploy or a joke by Uriel's drunken monk, let's get us to Urshilaku and be done with it.

Now *this* is an egg town. Gnisis squats atop the bank of the River Samsi, hemmed in by a fortifying semicircle of hills. Fort Darius guards one exit, while a Velothi tower makes up part of the natural stone archway of the settlement's western limit. The strider port rivals Balmora's in size and activity, and Gnisis apparently serves as entrepot for all of the upper West Gash. Beyond that point, however, the town is quiet. The miners' huts and cave dwellings look capable of rowdiness, beneath their honeycombed bluff full of kwama and the outdoor platform bar with its expansive awning, but today sleepiness prevails.

I stagger onto the riverside plaza, feeling the ache and sting of my foyada misadventure. The Temple here harbors some artifact and exceeds Maar Gan as a pilgrimage destination. Its walls are lined with market stalls, and I buy some extra undergarments (for sweetlands use only), squib jerky and Blight salve in the hour before the strider carries on for Khuul. No compass to be found, though. The Legion garrison here seems to consist almost entirely of orcs, drawing loathsome glances from every Dunmer in town. Like Maar Gan, it's almost all natives, and now that the ashlands have had a good hard swipe at me, I fit right in. Funny how repatriation works.

"This looks about right." The Altmer returns Nuleno's map, sketched on the back of some of the notes Caius returned to me after the meeting with Hassour. "Compass bearings look good too. I pulled security for a glass mine in the ashlands near there last spring. Don't think of picking it over, though. Nix hounds inherited the place as soon as we cleared out." This fellow is no Summerset goldenrod, that's for sure.

Our strider has been shuffling through a fjord-like inlet for a while now, the shore just on a level with the cockpit. The northwest coast of Vvardenfell is shockingly dissimilar to the Bitter Coast. The abrupt shelf that rises from those swamps tumbles into the sea here, producing a riot of surf, cliffs, jagged capes and titanic stone blocks.

"You should find your way quite easily," my Altmer companion continues. "If the weather proves fine. What is your business across the foyada, might I ask?"

The strider's abrupt climb rescues me from having to dodge that question, tilting the cockpit at a frightening angle. Loose cargo rumbles aft, pinning my legs to the soft interior shell. The golden-skinned mine guard cracks a smile and pulls himself upright to get the first glance of Khuul. Besides the rounded top of a Redoran-style tradehouse, there is little to be seen from the cockpit. As at Gnisis, the strider pulls to a halt ankle-deep in the water of a steep-banked channel, and we step out on an even gangplank. From the brilliant mists of morning and wispy clouds of the journey, it has become a dim, grey afternoon, tending meekly towards dusk. As I walk towards the heart of the fishing village (the Altmer said farewell and vanished into the adjacent eggmine in search of some overseer), however, the setting sun breaks through the low-level clouds to torch the water of the inner harbor. Khuul is built around a stony cove, sheathing it in boardwalks and little huts exactly the same as the native town at Seyda Neen. Going back far enough, on the far side of a millennium or so of interruption, and the place has a Nordic past, something the more jovial Third Era sons of Skyrim have not forgotten. Windhelm Knarrs predominate over Velothi luggers, and there is mead served beside the sujamma and (small quantities of) flin. Most charmingly, the strait from inner harbor to roadstead passes beneath a vaulting stone archway, one of Vvardenfell's more evocative natural sights. When the Nords here took to calling Khuul Little Solitude on account of it, the local Dunmer rejoined with Big Gnisis.

The tradehouse is quiet, with the atmosphere of the daytime tavern it is. From the looks of it, sailors go elsewhere. Nevertheless, I ask whether it would be possible to just hire a boat to take me to the north shore of the Ashlands.

"Shor's teeth, no. Sure, it looks a short trip and so it is, but the whole strait between Vardy and Sheogorath is shoal-water, and nary a chartmaker has glanced at it since Ygramor and Topal. You only

want to pick through there under oar, and no rower can withstand the mountain wind when it comes. It's always a long row inshore from any larger vessel, with little hope of being picked off the beach again. The worst of it is, when the southerly mountain airs cease, the Sea of Ghosts sets to blowing and turns the whole damn island into a lee shore set to freeze your piss in summer. I'd sooner sail Zafirbel Bay in an Imperial carrack than chance a landing there. All the shipping bound for Dagon Fel and Tel Vos keeps well out to sea."

In other words, scratch that. I ask about Nuleno's particular spur up into the border hills and ascertain that even a Telvannis slackwit could find it. The tradehouse also has in stock a faith-firer, an incendiary charm produced in bulk by Temple-licensed Telvanni merchants. It runs off a central, remote fire enchantment that has been splintered into dozens of individual objects. I can still build a fire from my Cheydinhal days, but starting one in the wastes is another matter. This trip's expense is already beginning to daunt (even though the money is not, primarily, my own), but the utility of a firestarter that works in the teeth of an ashstorm is self-evident. A bedroll is another essential item, and some dinner so as not to eat into my travel reserves.

Coffer depletion accomplished, I stripped, heedless of who was there to see, and plunged into the inestimable freezing joy of the ocean. Ashmire residue left my body in a waterborne halo, and even the itching of the salt that replaced it was a soothing presence over the next few days. After that I ran into some trouble finding lodgings until I remembered the name of one of Caius' Blades agents. His Majesty's Khuul watchman was not home, but my credentials were acceptable to his Argonian 'slave,' in fact a servant-assistant in his confidence. I was not, however, in the lizard's confidence, and passed a night of standoffish hospitality. The Imperial agent and master of the house apparently came and went without waking me. It would have been good to seek advice from that quarter, but my skin was healing and I was chafing at the bit to end the abortive phase of my mission.

The West Gash is so damnedly... pleasant. Sure, His Majesty's mineral envoys on tour, after completing their business in Ebonheart, reserve all their pleasant surprise for Ascadia, but I prefer the clear air here. There are even some trees, dogged specimens that resemble Anvil cork oak or scraggly Nibenean bamboo. But for the skinned knees and upper body, my ashlands sojourn would be hard to credit as an event of the day before yesterday.

The hills west of Bani-Dad proved easily visible from Khuul even down at sealevel. They played the usual Vvardenfell trick of pulling away from me as I approached, turning an apparently short distance into a considerable walk, a ruse of the above average visibility. A line of ledges and outcroppings declared impassibility, but I went right up to the base of the heights nevertheless, to inspect the barrier. Showing due respect for ordinary rough terrain is difficult after you've dared the mountain and swallowed a few mouthfuls of red ash.

So relatively docile was the landscape that I scarcely noticed the brigands, a pair of ashlanders nursing a cookfire beneath a green knoll. I did not give them a particularly wide berth, and they hailed me, communicating their desire to trade in practiced pidgin. Their amused countenance and our mutual lack of tradable items made the true situation clear, and when the larger of the pair clamped a hand about my wrist, he got the staff-end in the jaw. His companion lowered a chitin bow three inches for every inch I moved my spear towards the paralyzed ashlander's neck. It took three repeat charges before I got him to throw the arrows away. So that fit everything every Dunmer ever told me about ashlanders, returning a sense of warning to the West Gash and the Urshilaku mission itself. The remainder of the trip south was more hurried and less sanguine. As I gradually suspended the precaution of one glance over my shoulder for every fifty paces, the sky overhead spelled out what I was walking into. With plenty of ashlands and foyada still ahead, Red Mountain continued its fusillade. The hills to my left, the only thing distinguishing Gnisis from Maar Gan, vented the whole torrent of

Blight up away from land, towards the Sea of Ghosts. I spent the entirety of my subsequent ridgetop journey subjected to the concerted, focused blast of all the western ashlands, converted in a matter of yards into a brutal updraft. It was without a doubt the strongest wind I have ever felt this side of the Ghostfence.

First, however, I stood at the base of that long-promised stone spur, uncertain whether to camp here and give the wastes a full day, or take my chances with Nuleno's account of shelter on the far side, where an ashstorm was blowing. My dubious resolution on the latter was likely decided by my reluctance to camp anywhere, and certainly nowhere in that particular moment. So up and up, unsteadily in rubbery boots (my normal shoes adding weight to an overstuffed rucksack) as the West Gash pulled away into a coastal fog beneath.

And then? What is there left to say about an ashstorm, except to futilely entreat you to envision it as worse than ever before (I know you relish my descriptions until the hellish experience turns to lively pleasure in your mind). My gear was designed for a straight-on assault, not the wind's buoying, upcutting motion on that ridgeline. All that saved the crossing was its short duration and my new skill in holding the scarf and helmet right against my neck, keeping the ash out. An hour's eternity of that, and the northernmost limit of the wastes that stretched all the way south Arkngthand presented themselves as a sanctuary(!) from the storm. Descent meant sliding down the film of loose ash and pebbles on a slanted rock face, and I bowed to the inevitable intrusion of dust into my suit. The wind was palpably weaker, however, singing an entirely different tune at a level that did not try to wipe out thought itself. Though by any reckoning hours remained until sunset, now I was eager to camp, and spent the next stretch of harried, chafing, ash-strewn time struggling to hold my compass straight (larger boulders can affect its reading over considerable distances) and find a place to hole up. I sanguinely supposed that by usual standards of visibility it was night already, not having experienced the terrifying rain of pitch that is an ashstorm in darkness, the only time the wastes sheds its malevolent red.

In the end I found a cleft, if not a cave, someplace where the ash only skittered in, glancing sideways into the darkened, leeward space. I never attempted to light a fire, as the mountain wind is always warm, and all the fuel was outside anyways. That night and most of the following days of stomach pain, I cursed myself for not buying Nuleno's netchbag lined pack. My own kept out ash as well as a straw hat, and I wasted half my water imperfectly washing the grit (and probably Blight) from the jerky. The night under my thin blanket was one-fourth sleepless, a torment that sleep itself bore away as only sleep can. Upon waking, a group of squirrel-sized rats was gnawing at my rucksack, only deterred by my staff, which lay across it and had paralyzed one of their number. (Lesson one, the enchantment works subconsciously, lesson two, it scales according to the size of the creature.) Because even in this alien wasteland, there *would* be rats, wouldn't there?

Rodents scattering, I set off again. The storm appeared to have broken, as the wind carried only a scattering of particles, the grey stuff stuff of the surrounding badlands rather than Red Mountain sediment. It sifted across the dale like a sheet rustling over a bed, no worse than an exposed beach on Topal Bay. Back towards the southwest, however, the sky was aflame. If Bani-Dad turns out to be a river of lava when I get there, and I live to tell about it, I'm taking a damned boat to Urshilaku, no matter what the salts say.

The climb to the foyada walls is steep, but easily accomplished by a winding ascent across lumpy hillocks of various height, seemingly piled there by the mountain. Back up at high altitude, it takes no more than a few minute's exposure for the sense of fearful regret to set in, but again the crossing is swift. The earth drops away beneath me and there is old Bani-Dad again, that pain-in-the-ass gulf of obstruction. Judging by the foyada floor, Red Mountain did not send any lava this way after all. I would have been disappointed at the needless interruption had that day's short jaunt with Nuleno not flattened me so. I walked along the gulf for a little while, trying to identify a means of descent. Being a foyada and all, the only tactic was to drop my ruck down into the trench and leave

myself no choice but to follow it. That accomplished by calling on every ounce of latent childhood climbing ability (better to die of a broken leg down there than of thirst up here), I turned north.

Without my midnight trek along Foyada Mamaea, I don't know how I would have had the nerve for it. The mountain wind was still blowing half an ashstorm, not too rough on my back but perhaps loud enough to cover the approach of liquid fire. If the Sharmat recognizes me as Nerevar, can he swat me down with weather and Blight beasts as well? Or does he truly want me to climb Red Mountain? 'Shed cursed skin,' he bid me. Already done, friend Voryn, the skin off my sorry ass, all thanks to your belching.

Dwemer turrets show themselves above the eastern ridgeline, presumably the Druscashti that Nuleno mentioned. There is another Dwemer construction set into the cliff on this side, some sort of metal shelf or row of buttressed windows halfway up. Perhaps it was meant to harness the lava somehow. This is the last landmark before the final turning, and after that comes, well, the hard part. The pass out of the foyada is easy to find, a definite notch flanked by menhirs that seem shaped by mortal hands. Someone once said that all Vvardenfell is merely an expression of divine personality, and so it is, no more bound by the Earthbones than are the contraptions roaming across ageless Dwemer halls. The ashlands, of course, are where the personality comes from, and the landscape of Urshilaku remains the iconic standard for all wastelands, throughout my subsequent travels. All badlands must have beauty, Mehra Milo said later, or else mortals must have played a part in creating them. This is a divine desert, created when Akatosh sent his champion Trinimac to dismember the faithless Lorkhan, firing his bleeding heart across Tamriel on the head of an arrow to land here. The Star-Wound, Red Mountain. No one in his right mind sees the ashlands and doubts the truth of it. This is the beauty a god's death made.

The ashlands here are low in elevation and relief, trackless and yet spun about by bands of dark rock that wind through the softly-molded plateaus, serving as natural roads. The highlands are racer-haunted stone forests, where the teethlike monoliths gather in clusters, as soldiers before a march. Ashmires huddle in the hollows like oases, nourishing the scathecraw and firefern and ornery shalk with their sticky ooze. Not a tree here is still living, but their corpses are everywhere, interspersed with the occasional petrified strider or emperor parasol. By some miracle I beheld all this in clear air, a natural southerly breeze of Nirn sorting the finer dust without carrying any of it higher than my waist. The angry crimson tempest glimpsed earlier has passed through or moved off east to glower over Sheogorad. They'll be picking sand from their thatch in Dagon Fel for weeks.

The flatter terrain here makes the caves easier to spot, all of them housing animal dens, hunters' holes, hidden springs, lava vents. A few even sport doors. I skirt the daedric ruin (Ashurnabitchapi) Hassour's messenger described. Scamps and a daedric variant of Kagouti visibly stalk its strangely twisted spires and dizzying, distorted foundations. I hear there is an enormous temple to Mehrunes Dagon in the midst of Mamaea, just north of Fort Moonmoth and Arkngthand. The Oblivion stone has resisted Red Mountain's lava for millennia. Turning north along the perimeter of Ashurnabitchapi, my journey ended. But it wouldn't do to get into that now.

Instead, let us ask Hainab the huntress how the Stranger came to Urshilaku Camp. Most all ashlanders in a tribe are related somehow, so her second name is less important, and indeed kept private, except among privileged company.

You had just returned to camp that afternoon after the weeklong storm let up, to put the dye and twist back in your hunter's braids. A bull netch had been blown onto the beach near the clan's fishing weir, solitary and bewildered. Tussuradad spotted it, and the pair of you spent that morning chasing the beast down, affixing thin fiber ropes to its shell with javelins at thirty paces, then calling the other hunters when it tired. It is second nature to you now, the distance beyond which the netch will not vent

its bag at an attacker, preserving the precious toxins and gaseous substances within. Catching a full-blown netch is quite a coup, and today the tribe half-managed it. The bull bellowed on the stony shore and made that wheezing sound, indicating that it is too fatigued to spray acid. It took a half hour affixing the hooks, however, and one of a dozen flung grapnels punctured the gasbag, venting essence for five full minutes before the netch finally tired and was pulled onto the ground. Tussuradad risked his forearm and fingers plugging the hole while you drove the spear in just so, but much was lost. Still a useful kill, with some credit to the pair of you over the tribe, but oh, what could have been.

So play your role for the day and stalk through the camp, in the bare hollow filled with taut grey yurts and an ashmire in the middle. The children dare each other to submerge themselves in the muck, watched collectively by some anxious mothers from afar. They are so few, after all, and the future so much longer than the past... Keep on towards to upper yurts, a semicircle under a great tarp, centered around the ashkhan's dwelling and the arrow-straight pole of exotic Jeralls pine that supports it all. Dozens of little bamboo windchimes make their melodic knocking sound, monitored ceaselessly by the blind elders who know to perfection the tempo of worsening weather. It's all a little wearying today, making you wish for the days spent ranging along the West Gash, breaking in the guar even as you take them. This Empire actually patrols the roads now, making it difficult, albeit better for boasting. You even wish for your childhood traverse of the Great Scathes, long since closed tight by the Thief's coaxing and the Sharmat's earth tremors. Long, free nights on beds of scathecraw, with the tempting dreams to lull your sleep (no one tells Nibani Maesa of that). It is only when the Sharmat's vision-sendings stop that you know you are no longer a warrior worth taking. Truly, a curse worse than corpus.

Walk south a little ways (mountainward, not map-south). The throng descending on the dead netch has left the camp relatively quiet, a little empty. Even the sentry has departed for the kill, suspending his four-hour watch for Blighted visitors. Thread your way through the trama vines, with their enormous thorns sized for the hungry alit or guar. The smoke of two cookfires and the tops of five yurts still show over the slight rise that is the hollow's rim. Now try not to go for your knife as you notice the figure not ten paces distant, squatting on its haunches in the vines. Take in the crude Western spear, the dangling chitin helmet and sturdy—but obviously Redoran—wastes gear. There is no time for looking beyond that, because now the interloper has turned her gaze on you. Do not sound the alarm. She must be alone, to come so close to the camp. Settle for a hand on your dagger's hilt.

“Well met, Urshilaku.” The stranger stands. If this sweetlander is a Dunmer, she must be as degenerate as they come, amongst the settled peoples. Azura's Curse still rebounding through the generations. The ash sticks to her pale skin like paste, probably Blighted. She looks capable enough in her protective garments, however, that spear near at hand but dropped in the dust to signify ease. Her eyes are only halfway red but somehow entirely Dunmer. Look into them and stay your hand, delay any action. Here she sits, solitary in the ashlands, after her brazen trespass and address, her eyes reflecting only quiet humility. See the old tracks beneath her feet. Patience as well. Take your time in the answer, let the disjointed language of the Empire trip from your lips.

“What do you want here, outlander? We have no wish to trade this season.”

“I wish only to talk.”

“We do not hear trade proposals. Especially in... such fashion.”

“No talk about trade, I promise you. How may I honor the Urshilaku? A humble gift from an unlooked-for guest.”

Her hands move infinitesimally towards her pack, but you feel no curiosity as to its contents. Better to keep the rope-hand.

“You wish to claim our hospitality and talk as a guest?” Gesture at the emaciated thicket about you. “We will require a great deal of trama root for the netch we brought down. I am the hunter that dealt the killing blow, and have no wish to scrabble about in the ignoble dust. Such a task will suit your hands better, should you hope to treat with us as equals.”

This sweetlander won't know that all the trama root has long since been stored and treated, and to excess in this bare season. She gives an impassive nod, moving off in the direction of the nearest tangle. Shrug (a motion you learned from the West Gash usurpers) and return to the yurts. Preparing the netch will require every cutting implement in the camp, and Tussurradad's sister will lend you his whetstone. If she won't let you marry him, she will let you sharpen iron.

Set about your task, and try to tamp down the growing curiosity over this outlander. The most valued attribute in dealing with the perfidious settled peoples is meticulous indifference to all their ways and offerings, a counterweight to their own cocksure self-regard and a shield against temptation. This strange-faced interloper seems different somehow, determined and earnestly respectful, but you should still rebuff her. Your credit of success this day is only worth so much. At least you can be sure that she is indeed alone, now that the comings and goings of the tribe have effectively scoured the surrounding terrain. Only other nomads, or perhaps Telvanni, could surprise the Urshilaku, and she does not look Telvanni. Or at least, she better not be, because the sweetlander woman is now walking heedlessly through the camp towards your own yurt, ahead of a wall of hostile silence and still readiness. Damn her, she will stride right up to you, displaying two handfuls of trama root like they are precious glass crystals. Now comes the old dilemma. Do the faithless merit any courtesy shown to them, and is it shameful to dishonor those who have none? There is the easy answer, and then there is Tussurradad's answer. Honor is a quality of the very soul. It never shows its face to another, and lives through thyself alone. Accept the gift, and retract the insult of your demand with gratitude. She has shown her own forgiveness.

“Hainab of Urshilaku.”

“Naleva of Polefel.”

You realize that the sweetlander must have faced the wastes for days without shelter or aid. The ashlands are to the House people's best rangers as the Blight storm is to the Urshilaku child, so your guest is in need of hospitality.

“I welcome your gift, Naleva Polefel. I cannot discuss matters until the catch has been properly rendered, and it would be rude to question a guest unrefreshed. Enter my yurt, partake of spring water and hackle-lo. You may rest there while I see to the business of the tribe.” It is not orthodox to leave a guest alone, but she will not know that, and the yurts will not chatter about this least of your oddities. Tussurradad's sister had best bite her tongue, through, lest she lose it.

The animal skin rippled slowly above my head, yielding no insight on whether or not I was permitted to sleep. My host's unexpected concern had triggered the awareness of famishment and fatigue, but left questions as to the propriety of satiation. I had guzzled my water in the knowledge that it could be refilled, taken some hackle-lo out of politeness, yet was I expected to sleep now, perhaps through the night? And if so, were the bedrolls open, or should I simply curl up among the cushions that are so plainly for sitting? As the rigors of the ashlands overcame hackle-lo's borrowed wakefulness, I opted to put physical concerns before social worries. The Urshilaku could well banish me the instant I explain my purpose here, so best to remain in readiness for another ashlands journey.

The sensory details of the yurt crept into my mind during the less distracted period of grateful sleep. Each dwelling has its own set of chimes, an improbably soothing rattler set to knocking by any movement within the tent, or any breath of wind that reaches through the smoke flap. Whatever earthy smells the fauna-building around you may produce, the overriding fragrance of the central cookfire masks it. The embers always cling to some small measure of life, and fragrant as a censer, they give off a scent too fresh and comforting to have been produced by any ashlands plant. It *is* from the wastes, of course, from a source similar to the vaunted Telvanni bug musk.

Greeting me when I wake is the glow of that fragrant cookfire. Hainab balances cranelike on

her haunches, stirring it, and everything about us is dark.

"It's the middle of the night," I realize, sitting up. Other prone forms stir in the shadowy recesses of the yurt, and the hard tang of cold ashlands air wafts in puff by puff.

"It is the first waking, Naleva Polefel, after midnight. Quite fitting to be up. I have been waiting for you." Like on a hot night in Nibenay, I suppose the half-night stirring is a custom here. Back home you're supposed to have a mate to share it with, though.

"The hospitality of the Urshilaku deserves its reputation." A yawn mars the praise.

"Some grey tea," Hainab replies, handing me a cool horn vessel. The drink is thin and ticklish across the tongue, sprinkled with ground hackle-lo quite liberally. "Now I would be honored to hear your reasons for coming here."

"I came..." How exactly to approach this? The cult is illegal, but I doubt these ashlanders fret much over that. One thing I know is that Caius definitely did not send me. "...seeking the followers of the Nerevarine. I am on the search for the prophecies, and was told that Nibani Maesa keeps them and Sul-Matuul defends them."

"How surprising you are, outlander." She does not seem surprised, but I suppose that's what comes of having a guest for hours without asking the purpose of their visit. The Urshilaku do everything in its own time. "What are the prophecies to you?"

I pause. I am not a scholar, but can nomads tell the difference? I'm not sure what I do look like.

"I have felt the Sharmat's rising wrath. The Dunmer no longer see the Tribunal's strength shielding them, and some of them look to their first Saint. The Sharmat speaks in storm and dream, so I seek out Nerevar." There, that ought to speak her language, assuming she doesn't toss me on a pyre for mentioning the dreams.

"Peakstar was Nerevar, but she is dead." That is the first confirmation of her demise I have heard, and from a source who would otherwise readily deny it. "And when the settled people pray to Nerevar, they look blithely at his murdered corpse, which cannot help them." She gives the fire a rapier thrust. "I hope what you say about the House people and their false gods is true. Sharmat's ascent may be the death of us, but the traitors never could defeat him in any case. If you put stock in the prophecies, you are wise to come to us first, in our own custom, and so declare yourself. Some would call you an outlander, fit for exile from this place." She glances at the other hunters about the yurt. My heritage must have been the subject of some discussion.

"So the Urshilaku keep the faith? The expectation of Nerevar?"

"Only a few of us are deep in that mystery. The rest merely wait and hope, as do I. Nibani Maesa serves the prophecies as our wise woman, but she will not speak to you, I do not think. Your search takes you to the heart of the sacred, that which is not for the eyes of outsiders."

"What of Sul-Matuul? Your ashkhan, is he not?"

"It is not meet to approach him uninvited. You must go through Zabamund, his gulakhan. But the gulakhan is a fierce fighter whose character matches his killing arm. You may not get far with him, and my hospitality takes no precedence over his displeasure."

Meaning she will evict me? Well, there is always the recall scroll.

"I understand."

"Shall we go?"

I blink.

"Right now?"

"The gulakhan stands guard through the second waking, by custom. He will not be occupied." She hangs her teacup on a hook and holds open the doorflap.

It is a still night, probably the first such in a week. Maybe the mountain wind is still pounding away to the south, for the cold air is full of wispy pale smoke that reduces visibility. The refreshing weather has half the tribe out of doors, talking in quiet circles while the yurtbound children peek out in envy. By the time we make five paces towards the central yurts, nearly all the ashlanders are aware of

me, silently and inconspicuously. The word must have passed around the settlement during the evening. As we cross into the windchime shadows beneath the wide awning, a chitin-clad figure steps into our path.

“Zabamund's son,” Hainab explains. A short, rather imperious sentence gets the sentry to stand aside, and her voice is radically different in her native tongue. “If his kin does not challenge us, Zabamund's invitation is implicit.” The huntress glides forward to the wood-framed doorway just south of the ashkhan's dwelling and flicks a scarab bell that serves as a knocker. Once again, I assume that the onus is on the occupant for keeping us out, as Hainab barks a few more lilting, discordant phrases and ushers me in.

As a champion, lieutenant and bodyguard, Zabamund looks pretty much as you'd expect. He is to Hainab as Hainab is to me, when it comes to the made-of-ashdirt look. Fully armored, too. There are two wives and another man in his yurt, but they studiously ignore our conversation as ashlanders are wont to do.

“You are the guest of Hainab.” His voice is the brief rumbling of boulders that precedes a rockslide, with the accent of the West Gash merchants who taught him the language. “So you are nothing to me. Speak your piece.”

“I come seeking the counsel of Sul-Matuul, and beseech you as his gulakhan to permit my entrance.” Who knows if that strikes the right tone, but at least it is an approximation of the language ashlanders like to employ with strangers.

“An impertinent request. I guard the ashkhan against Blight and beast. From ...man I also preserve him, from the yammering of those unworthy of his ear. Through Hainab's weakness you have been admitted here undeserved, and now have no cause to come any further. Why should I allow you to bother my master with your outlander's offers of trade and faithless dealings when you will not treat with anyone of your own rank?”

Uh, would some trama root change your mind? At least there was a question in there, the only glimmer of hope.

“Know this, Zabamund of Urshilaku: I do not come seeking trade, nor any other means of gain, for outsiders or even the tribe itself. If need be I will surrender all my wealth as gifts, or fritter it away for food while haunting your doorstep. I came to the ashkhan and the ashkhan alone, for the sake only of myself and the wisdom I require.”

“You will surrender your wealth, you say...” During the dramatic, expansive hand gestures of my rebuttal, my tunic had swayed just so, to reveal my purse beneath the traveling satchel. Whether in that moment I possessed the innuendo to display it intentionally remains a mystery. Zabamund's eyes missed nothing, of course. “The Urshilaku appreciate gifts, humble actions to match humble and honest words.”

“And what is more humble than gold?” I reply, cutting the purse from my belt and handing it to the champion. As he sizes it up, I throw in the faith-firer. “And please transmit this gift to the ashkhan, so that his sons will never find themselves without fire, even under the Mountain's gaze.”

Zabamund meets my eyes.

“This lends credit to your actions. Tell me once again of your mission to the ashkhan.”

“Azura's dreams do battle with the Sharmat's visions in my mind. Both have sped me here, in search of the signs of the Nerevarine. Only the lore of the Urshilaku can solve my riddle.”

He flexes his shoulders, bearing suddenly less stiff.

“Very well, outlander, your manners and mystery have swayed me. Maybe Sul-Matuul will be angry with me, but I think I can bear that. Enter his yurt, and do not return crestfallen if he will not recognize you.”

“Will he be asleep?”

“If it pleases him, he will sleep.” Aslight grin. “But it is the first waking, and at such a time the ashkhan may be roused to handle the business of the tribe. I as his gulakhan have deemed your errand

meritorious of his attention. So go, and fear not, for only I shall kill you for any wrongs you commit.”

I bow, and step outside to where perhaps the entire tribe (minus Hainab) looks on. The musky, acrid scent of dead netch is wafting across the camp, and I seriously wonder whether I have just been sabotaged. No man of position I have ever known would tolerate being woken by such an interloper, and an ashkhan in a blind rage is not something this fact-finding mission can survive.

I am ready to sleep again, and the night has grown darker. Sul-Matuul's yurt has the same sort of framed entrance as Zabamund's, but this one appears secured against the dust. I fumble about the edges in panic until the drawstrings reveal themselves. Wonder of wonders, the ashlanders know the square knot, but I still have just announced myself as either an outlander or a blind woman.

On the other hand, now I am spared the agony of tapping a sleeping chieftain on the shoulder. Someone rolls over inside and as I push through the doorflap, light kindles inside a hanging lamp, transferred by expert fingers from the glowing coals on the floor. Sul-Matuul stands to receive me, dressed for traveling. His face is the thinnest paper spread tightly across the bones, a wonder that the sharp structures below do not puncture it. The ashkhan is in his prime, but ashlands-old, wind-wasted and impossibly imposing for it, such that his beady eyes convey authority and intelligence. He wears something like a crown, a fine iron band that grows thicker in the front, reaching up towards the sharp spike between his brows. There is an insignia at the center of it, a pair of spines on the flanks, and a single steely ring, too small for any adult finger, resting around the spike like a horseshoe on a pole.

“What has the gulakhan sent me? I did not look for such as you even in the strangest of my dreams.” His voice is a whisper, the way the mountain wind whispers at you before it kills you.

“I apologize for waking you, my lord.” I slip back into polite Western address momentarily.

“Here an apology is a deed, outlander, so do not offer me words. Just your explanation.” For all his poise and presence, I can see the sleep in his eyes. Do it now.

“My name is Naleva Polefel, born to a Dunmer of Cyrodiil. I have come seeking those Velothi who keep the faith in Nerevar's return. Two names I was given, Sul-Matuul and Nibani Maesa.”

“We do await the Moon-and-Star, and reap the disappointment of the long centuries. But what can that be to an outlander? You have woken me, and bribed or bewildered my gulakhan, so speak quickly and plainly.” There's the snark. And no tea from this one.

“I—” Being told to speak quickly does nothing to help my eloquence, and speaking plainly is out of the question. “I have been studying the Nerevarine cult and the return of the Sixth House—”

“If you are one of the readers, come to take our knowledge from us, you will depart empty-handed. Other tribes have seen your like.”

“Forgive me, I have expressed myself poorly. I do not intend to bear you wisdom away with me; I seek your counsel, your reading of prophecy.” His eyes narrow (if that is even possible), clearly waiting to see how I am mincing my words. “The very night I returned to Vvardenfell, Azura visited my dreams, telling me that she would be watchful. Since then, the Sharmat has haunted my sleep, even sending his servants to hound me.” I drop my satchel on the floor, burlap falling aside to expose the malevolent length of the ash statue. “I bring you his harbinger as a gift. Not long ago, he spoke through it and named me Lord Nerevar.” A brief pause to let *that* wash over him. “I would not credit his lies had I not read the Stranger, and found myself to be an orphan of the Nerevarine's sign. As an outlander I cannot claim your kinship, yet my suspicions brand me a heretic in the eyes of the Temple. By that token, and the ancestors we must share, though I know them not, I humbly request that the wise woman test me against the prophecies. I cannot discern this destiny on my own.”

The ashkhan drops into a squat, which apparently does not signify informality or subservience here.

“This is the stuff of madness, but yours are not the words of a lunatic. I would tell you that your suspicions cannot be true, but such is not my place. Nibani Maesa could put your mind to rest.”

“I heard that she kept the prophecies...”

“And I am her guardian. I do not shirk from that responsibility, Naleva Polefel, even for the

sake of the most earnest tourists. Urshilaku's sacred mysteries must not be picked over in such a way. We have kept them from a hundred generations of the Tribunals's repression and the Sharmat's predations. They belong only to the wise women, and those of the tribe they deem trustworthy."

"Is there no way I could speak with her of Nerevar? Surely she could test me against the prophecies without revealing secrets." I hear my voice gathering pace, failure gathering in the air near the top of the yurt. Some arguments can't be won.

He stirs the ashes at his feet, motioning for me to take a seat.

"I myself could supply you with the answer, were you be weighed and measured so simply. But prophecy is not straightforward." The ashkhan reaches out towards the ash statue, but hesitates. He withdraws his hand and then cocks his head, as if listening. The ringlet on the tip of his headdress winks at me as he looks up. "Peakstar is dead."

"The Urshilaku are the first I have found who unreservedly believe it."

"Nibani Maesa dreamt of it during the storm." Some noise deep in his throat vaguely resembling a sigh. "It is hard to cherish the mysteries of prophecy in days like these. Peakstar failed as Incarnate, and your claim, visions or not, is purest presumption. But in these days of Blight... If you are willing to prove yourself a faithful friend of the clan, I will admit you to the dream-seer of the Urshilaku."

So then, this is a mission of stages. A third scowling grey obstacle to pass, then the truth.

"I am honored by the chance."

"You will do us a service, Naleva, and be named Clanfriend. But it is no simple errand. The attempt may lead to your death."

"Understood." A small lie, as I don't wholly understand why I'm risking my life chasing this prophecy. I'm not the urchin girl I was when Antabolis sent me to Arkhngthand; I can survive here without Caius. Dagoth's provocative vision has receded into days past, and that dream of Azura (which never impressed me unduly) was a solid two weeks ago. The ashkhan nods at my affirmation, however.

"The Sharmat pushes us harder every season, and not all our weapons against him are tangible. We have our own dreams to combat his, specters for his specters, kin for kin. Recently though, it is not enough. Those who think to the future speak darkly of living as vagabonds on Sheogorad, or as miners for the despicable Imperials. The Urshilaku would sooner leap into Red Mountain's gullet than suffer that." Now he seizes the ash statue and breaks it over the iron of his knee. "I thank you for this gift. It is not necessary to remind me of our enemy, but you have refocused my mind on the true task of the Nerevarine, a salvation which we must not harbor with jealousy or suspicion, despite the absurdity of any one claim. The False Incarnates are Azura's children and servants. Are you ready to hear your trial?"

"Yes." His words admit me to a privileged world already.

"My father, Sul-Senipul, was a strong leader. He wore the Ghoststring of Alandro-Sul and was his Speaker, as am I. He led us well, but in good times, and was buried in a sweet year. With him in the caves went his earthly treasures, and now we have need of them again, in flesh and spirit. I charge you to enter the burial caverns and bring back my father's bow."

"I shall," I say, as a frog says it shall fly to Masser, or pay the Emperor's taxes.

"Hainab will take you east, a morning's walk to the entrance. The guardians will not take kindly to your trespass, and you are free to defend yourself. If any of the watchful ancestors do fall at your hands, their treasure will do them no good. Disturb as little as you can, but take freely in the event. No doubt Hainab will slay you upon your return if you give any insult by it."

She had also better give me a hand if I come out of that hole in the ground with all the shambling monstrosities of hell at my heels.

"I accept your trial."

"Then return to your host until the second waking at dawn, and be on your way."

I ended up sleeping long past sunrise, and was mistaken in my preemptive characterization of the Urshilaku burial caverns as a hole in the ground. Although I was not far off at first, when Hainab pushed me through the darkened doors with impatient eyes, into a long, descending passageway. For certain, it was no Dwemer palace. Since it had been so awkward to pry into particulars in the ashkhan's presence, I begged Hainab for some description of my objective. 'If the Bone-Biter Bow is not plain to you,' she said, 'then your Nerevar notion is even more nonsensical than it seems.' With those buoying words, it was down into the darkness with my guttering taper.

Or not totally into darkness. Vvardenfell's caves harbor fungal growths that glow quite distinctly, an ambient radiance that is faint in any one locale, yet can light an entire grotto when clustered. Their light retreated before me as I made my halting way down a long decline, feet splayed out before me on the strangely smooth stone. A subterranean foyada this is, a foyada at night. That illusion lasts only minutes as the air begins to thicken. I can't say exactly what change it underwent, only that it lost the glittering sharpness of the ashlands, step by step. When I reached the antechamber to the tombs of the Urshilaku, the transformation made itself clear. Here, the air is *wet*. The realization is marvelous; for several seconds I cast about trying to absorb the dampness through my parched skin and tongue, to drink the atmosphere. And ahead, too, those small echoing sounds are droplets of falling water. I took them for the omnipresent pebble-rattlings of the ashlands. As the entrance draws closer, the other sounds emerge, sifting through the curtains of background noise to sidestep towards me obliquely. It is whispers, a frenetic chorus of them, undulating in pitch and tempo but only minutely. The Urshilaku of ages past recognize my coming, and I am not to be shown their hospitality.

Twin doors stand across the antechamber from me, a rounded room buttressed by black shale pillars. The entrance stands atop a crude stone platform, isolated by an encircling pool of black water. Flanking that are two small menhirs with a circumference of hooded skulls set into their surface, more pools around the base, each a foot across and filled with steaming sky-blue liquid. There's nothing for it but to jump, and the urge to put the ominous chamber behind me speeds my flight.

The doors have no handles, but clearly open inward. I end up pushing through them, snapping a thin strap that secures the inside. The incalculable age of the wooden portal imprints on the leather, making me feel as if I have just breached three eras of history. At maximum, however, the tribesmen made this descent a generation ago, for the burial of Sul-Senipul. More whispers now, and louder. The tunnel flattens out, and there is the water, an expanse of it in the distance. First, however, a short corridor flanked by rows of crude stone pedestals, like emperor parasol stalks rising from the earth. Atop each one sits a mummified corpse, its knees pulled tight about it in a curling embrace. No dirt to cover the heads of the ashlanders, for the mountain does its best to bury them while still alive. No Dunmeri cremation, either, for not even an ashkhan is worth the fuel.

At that thought, the watcher stepped out from behind the stone plinths. My heart attempted an escape from my throat when I spied his ivory sheen at thirty paces, so I know it would have burst had he showed up much closer. The guardian before me was, in purest essence, a skeleton, but at the same time bore little resemblance to the reanimated husks that delighted the crowds at the Nibennium fairs (back before the Mages cracked down, that is). Bones are bones, yet this skeleton is unquestionably an *ashlander*, head to toe. The spirit is still in him, that's it. Not just the headdress, whorl patterns (like some sort of holy scrimshaw), ritual medals, but he has almost a glow about him, telling me that he is exactly what he is, a young warrior. No rude Western necromancy could possibly animate those fingers and vanished sinews so finely, move them with all the will and heart and perfection of the breathing man. The love of the living, the anger of the sentry, the glimmer of sentience accomplishes that, as he nocks an arrow to his chitin bow.

And oh right, that's a problem for me. I sidestep behind the doors as the arrow ripples past to shatter on the stone ascent. There is no way this fellow can land one between my eyes if I poke around

the corner, but he looses shafts as if he could. Actually, he fires whether I stand in the doorway or not. The sense of danger that arrived so late now falters. This skelly can't hit me from here, no matter how culturally authentic it may be. On the other hand, I can't enter safely, so I suppose he's doing his job. Take another look at this, shall we? His fingers have a liveliness that is more unnerving than the toothy grin of his skull, but the speed isn't quite there. Leisurely, the shafts come in, some seconds slower than the barrage of a living youth. The defect introduces an unwelcome possibility. Can I rush him in time? I doubt that the ashlands jerkin can turn even these rusty old broadheads, and the illuminating sparks on impact speak to some manner of killing enchantment.

The notion seems obvious to me now, and yet I'm sure I waited for several minutes, uncertain whether or not the stream of arrows was finite. Three heartbeats after a broadhead skittered off skyward, I wrenched the ancient door from its hinges with a grunt, thrust it forward before me and charged. The damp timber gave way beneath my fingernails, and slammed into my knees with every increasingly slick step. Then the arrow hit, a ringing *thwack* followed imperceptibly later by a flash and a rush of screeching current. My left hand went slack, and I stumbled over the falling board. Bringing my spear back to the fore, ten endless paces remained, sprinting all-out while the shining Velothi corpse brought death into his his fingers ahead of me.

Arrow nocked and half-drawn, I led with the butt end of my spear, bringing it down on the guardian's carved collar bone. He didn't fall flat like the cliffcracer or Todwendy, but his frame lost its simulacrum of life for a few seconds, its motions becoming crude, a harsh and vile construct. The staff's charm bought me enough time to knock the skeleton down and pin it to the floor with a spearpoint through its ribcage. My ashlands gear proved more than able to resist its terrible grasping fingers at my sides, and now with a knee on its hollow sternum, I severed the head with a flurry of blows from the Ald'ruhn dagger.

At that, the whispers faded to almost nothing, receding down the cavern ahead. I examined the bow, but its lacquered surface flaked off in my hands, as if it would undergo a century of decomposition then and there. All the embalmed statue graves had a choice treasure placed with them, or clutched in their frail hands, but most had rotted down to almost nothing in the damp air. I continued on between the double row of corpses, catching glimpses of teeth and jeweled eyes between clustered, tightly-held knees. I had no fear of any of them reanimating. Where the skeleton archer had been immaculately prepared to stand guard, all these above still wore their clothes and were sheathed in shrunken flesh. Atop the pillars, that was their place for eternity.

Past that corridor, though, was another story. The water in the broad cavern was full of spirits. Those same vaguely mushroom-shaped pillars served as stepping stones through the silvery lake, at a short leap's distance. More plinths occupied solitary positions in the water, some still host to the curled mummies. A host of dead apparitions had rallied to answer my victory, and clustered at the edge of the corridor in the gulf between water's edge and the first stone plinth. Whatever ghostly simulacrum the archer had been clothed in, the living visions of it populated the liquid mausoleum below me, and they were enraged. As the generation of Urshilaku warriors thrust up at me with spearpoint and finger-bone, however, their extremities took solid form. Their malice brought their killing hands back from the grave, flinging up a wall of weapons in my path.

The swimmers' movements were not coordinated, and it proved easy to pick my moment and leap over the first trench, chitin-plated shins slapping against an ineffectually-brandished waraxe. But the landing was almost the end of me, as my feet slid on the mossy platform, shunting me towards the next watery gap, to which the ancestors had instantly relocated. I saved myself by leaping over it as well, ending up on hands and knees atop the second plinth, with a dozen more to go. By some minor miracle, the spear stayed in my grasp.

Before I could appreciate that outcome, another much older polearm slammed into my back. The corporeal manifestation of the guardians' weapons had undergone all natural corrosion, because any point worth its iron would have pierced the netch leather and ground to a halt in my lungs. I

scrabbled to my feet, belatedly realizing the true challenge of the swimmers. On this narrow circular island, they were now all around me, with full scope to lunge and jab from any direction. Javelins emerged from the shining water without so much as rippling its surface, a momentary increase in the hissing whispers the only audible warning. The skeletal hands could reach just high enough to scratch at the top of the stone plinth with clawed fingers, sometimes grasping the end of my boot with freakish, heedless strength until I battered them down to nothing with the spear.

In the lonely, rushing air of the third leap, soaring inches above the swimmers' outstretched weaponry, I saw the watchers. Too deep in the water to focus on without taking a spear thrust to the gut, I perceived only their ancient armor and the indisputable potency of their gaze. The revenants waited at a distance, sticking to my peripheral vision, and even as I danced my evasive dance through the swimmers' assaults, I knew that they were very old. Corporeal even in the water, I saw some glass armor and other forms of war gear that no longer existed, either in reality or graven images. Scarab shell plates and glittering chitin mail, whatever the ashlanders must have worn when they held Nerevar to his oath by Moon-and-Star. For now they seem content to observe, perhaps to direct. But when I return, bearing away the treasure of Sul-Senipul? I cannot credit the thought that they are bound in place down there, unable to leave the water.

That was the time I wanted to turn back, which I suppose is an impulse that has to come along once in any caper as ill-advised as this. Back in Nibennium it was always fun to laugh at the poor sod who got himself done in, perhaps stealing money from the docks cartels or trying to handline a river dragon, ignoring all the warnings any normal person would have heeded. And wasn't that just mine? The realization that the goddamn army of Sul is going to eviscerate me when I try to leave? I know the one sign when I see it, that tickling doubt courteously extended by the universe, inquiring whether I prefer to live. Who could have dreamt that it would be so easy to ignore, even as I am fully cognizant of its meaning? So I suppose every credulous victim who ever earned our delighted scorn only brought out our lack of empathy. Not for their suffering, no of course not. It was our lack of empathy for the choice, the reality that when faced with the option, it can be damnedly hard to turn back.

So that leaves me with a dozen or so stone plinths to go. A series of increasingly dignified jumps saw me across, although a spiked club caught me in the thigh near the far side, nearly flipping me forward, head over heels. That crossing accomplished half of Hainab's advice. 'Descend father than you thought possible, then cross the water. When you rise again, Sul-Senipul's chamber is the highest. It is not easy to lose your way, but do not fall.'

And so shit, this is what she meant by the rising and falling bit. I stand at the base of a soaring stone column, bulbous and twisted like an emperor parasol. But where a Vvardenfell mushroom is as tall as two houses, this monstrosity rears up like a Nibenay cypress, fully the height of Vivec's cantons, and as thick around the base as the citadel of Fort Moonmoth, all inside the airy hollow space of the chamber that is larger still. And just like a canton, it pours water from itself, a series of cataracts emerging from various points along its length to disperse into encompassing showers that plunge into the inky lake beneath. So this is how the Dunmer survive in the ashlands. All the water is underground, and none of all this is the stuff they can actually drink.

Rise, Hainab said. In the style of a Taneth minaret, the path of ascent wraps around the tower's exterior, but without any steps or construction of any nature. At first, a circling ramp of boulders, but then the way ripples free from its moorings into celestial ribbons of miraculously hanging stone. The intestines of the earth twirl up and around the column, climbing in a surreal rightward spiral. Each bridging segment of rock stands there without support for dozens of feet, long past the natural tensile strength of any earthly stone. In places the traverse narrows to a few widths of my foot, and it is everywhere terrifying slick, spattered by sweet water from above and bathed in the cycling mist of the bluish air. More mummified ashlanders sit at attention, occupying various points along the ascent with their eternal items, carvings and mounted skulls. For every corpse on the central pillar, there are three squatting on their shelves along the outer wall of the cavern, leering down at me. The fiercest warriors

and choicest morsels must be up there, for every now and then I pass by a burial space containing an enchantment so strong that I can feel its tingle from twenty paces. This chamber is only the central hub of the Urshilaku tombs, because I bypass a number of other doors on my climb, only too happy to leave them be.

The climb took half an hour, to fabricate an arbitrary number. I suspect it was much quicker than that. The experience of fear, disbelief, swelling panic and something like joy fluctuated with every change in altitude. I know I could write a half dozen essays on my feelings at each stage of the passage through that peerless place, but now there seems to be little point in it. Suffice to report that my feet slipped entirely out from under me only once, I never touched any of the treasure, and I never ended up hanging by my fingernails from any of the stone bridges. The upward journey ended at a level with the conical peak of the parasol-cypress-canton stone, with fifty feet of the chamber still ballooning out overhead, and a stepping-stone network of burial shelves beckoning to my avarice. But I passed through the last door and came to the tomb of Sul-Senipul.

First, of course, there was trouble, a duo of skeletal bowmen loosing arrows at me from a basalt mezzanine. So recently emerged from the numbing atmosphere of the Laterus Burial (Hainab later supplied the name but otherwise refused to be appreciative of my gushing awe), I possessed something like fearlessness and pounded through the darting shafts to the reach the corridor and come at them from behind. Somehow they never landed a shot, and for all their lifelike archery technique could not resist my momentum as I shoved them from the high ledge. Some of the limbs still moved after the impact shattered the majority of their other bones. Then the final guardian ripped some lengthy gashes in my leather jerkin, almost gutting me (let's not dwell on that part), and it was on to Sul-Senipul. His chamber had some of the only real stonework in all the caverns, sporting not only support pillars but walls and ceiling of dark shale as well.

There was a wraith, an honest-to-goodness wraith that I tried not to look at after ascertaining that it didn't enjoy having my spearpoint in its midst, with the enchantment blazing for all the good it would do (damned thing went dark for days after that). If you know what specters do, he did it me pretty well, being a formerly pretty accomplished political leader of the Urshilaku and all. What you care about is the loot, in any case. In the alcove where the wraith petered out (or maybe just faded away to rejuvenate) lay the bow, a rather comely old thing, carved and patterned as only chitin can be. I felt a trace of enchantment, something old and dusty and promising to do nasty things to people's innards, but noting terribly potent or clear. It didn't feel nearly so useful as the skeletons' arrows that gleefully shouted out fire and lightning (I grabbed a quiver on the way out), but that wasn't why the ashkhan wanted it anyways. Most interesting of all was the staff atop the tomb, clearly nothing that belonged to the ashlanders or even the Dunmer, although it was made of ebony. Worth one-tenth (as of the import glut last year) its weight in gold, the oval-headed walking stick looked like something out of the Arcane University. Maybe some Urshilaku once took it as a trophy, but when I touched it, I stopped caring entirely. Hell with the price of ebony, this son of a bitch says it can make me *fly*.

So now I don't have to walk out of the tomb. It's enough to simply step off the edge of the mezzanine and let myself slowly float downwards. According to the particular pulse in my fingers, the staff should allow me to walk upwards through the air as well, but that might take some practice. For now, it's enough to skip those slick stone bridges and drift through the Laterus Burial, avoiding every waterfall while the rising pressure just inside my temples tells me when it's time to land. I'm sure I looked like some sort of descending demigod, arms outstretched with a polearm in each hand and the ancient bow slung across my chest. I'm also sure that I looked like an idiot when the sudden onset of a sneeze broke my concentration and sent me plummeting the last ten feet, raising bruises of shocking longevity and snapping the bowstring. Thank *all* the gods, chitin isn't heavy enough to sink very fast, or else I would have had to discover just how deep the water in that pool was. I only just managed to grab the vanishing bow by seizing the tiny metal glint that showed through the water, and discovered that the severed bowstring had a small iron ringlet attached to the nocking point, to steady the archer's shaft.

The round little bauble had me standing there for some minutes by the lake's edge, running my thumb over it from time to time. This bow is enchanted, sure, but the ring is something else. The only thing that can be said about it is that it feels like the soul gem I bought with Todwendy, and even as I make the comparison, I know it is nothing like the truth. With a final shrug I head back towards the stepping-stone lake of ghosts, pain shooting up legs that are nonetheless happy to trod the ground again.

Well, at least the lower regions are happy. Because you know the aforementioned idiots of Polefel in Nibennium? The ones who stole from the mob or tried to handline river dragons and died for our amusement? I now go to join them, perhaps more definitively earning my borrowed name. As I stand at the water's edge, looking out to the passage that will take me back to the sky, all the eldrich guardians of the lake have risen, ranks and ranks of them drawn up on the stone plinths to seal me in. The spectral throng beneath do not even deign to muster, now that a dozen of their corporeal brethren have taken the stand. Still clutched in my palm, the ringlet on the bowstring winks at me. *I told you so, n'wah.*

The guardians begin to rap the butts of their spears upon the ground, armor clattering and echoing. At least none of them carry bows.

"All I wanted to do was talk that bint Nibani Masea." I'm sure I meant to shout it, but I end up murmuring it to the ring. "And sure, If I'm Nerevarine it would be good for a few laughs before they cart me off to the Ministry. Or else I'll know what Azura and Dagoth were blathering about."

And then, I wish that something else could be said. I wish I could tell you that I experienced a sudden compulsion, an arcane command, and overwhelming urge, *anything*. But the truth of it it, I simply snapped the bowstring one more time, freed the ringlet, and as if it were a bit of hackle-lo, popped it into my mouth. 'Heavy, yet light-headed,' is the way others have described it, and the simplicity of those words (and indeed, the obscurity of them) pleases me. Any other description would simply compound the problem of inadequacy.

"URSHILAKU." The word erupts from my chest like thunder. Not word. Voice. Not my voice, someone else's, and my lips stay shut, jaw frozen and dead like the guardians before me. The voice shivers the surface of the water, rebounding upon itself but never diminishing the clarity of its speech. It is coming from the ring and it is harsh and male; little more than that can be said.

"Know your forebear, Alandro-Sul, Son of Azura, who stood in the presence of the Moon-and-Star when the words were said, and marshaled your fathers for the oaths and deeds of the holy war upon the mountain. I, witness of the usurpation of my mother, and the Black Hands, and the Emancipator of Veloth, witness to the murder of Nerevar, who lived among the Urshilaku for a time after the Sun's Death. In the name of all this I charge you to stand down, cool your anger, and resume your hallowed vigil."

I know I said that the words echoed, but silence reigns the instant the voice stops, swatting the echoes down out of the air. They vanish into the water, as quickly and noiselessly as the guardians themselves. I don't remember the rest of the journey out, but when I reached Hainab (who did not slay me for taking away the levitation staff), the ringlet was pressed into my palm so tight that its circular imprint lasted for hours.

Sul-Matuul scowls at my return, eyes fixed upon the broken bowstring. When I hand the weapon to him, however, I gingerly proffer the ringlet first, and the bow after. The ashkhan's frown vanishes at that.

"Who is Alandro-Sul?" I ask in a flat voice.

"You seem to already know, Naleva Polefel. That is a single ring of his Wraithmail."

"He spoke through me in the caverns, banishing the guardians to allow my escape, but that is all

I know of him.”

If you've ever wondered what it takes to rattle an ashkhan, there's an example. He'll still play it deadpan, though.

“It is not for nothing that I bear his name, for I am his Speaker amongst the Urshilaku, and wear another of the Thousand Ringlets from his mail coif about my own brow.” He takes the bow reverently, and hands it his wife. “That he should make use of you is... astounding. Perhaps you shall not make quite so much a mockery of the title Clanfriend, despite your superficial initiation trial. Do avail yourself of Urshilaku hospitality in the future, and speak of my favor when others in the tribe do not recognize you.”

I bow my head, having arrested the full Western obeisance partway through.

“It is no small honor you extend to me, Sul-Matuul. But I still would know more of this Alandro-Sul.”

A thin smile.

“I would direct you to the wise woman, but I suppose it is my place as well. Sul was the son of Azura, Shield-Companion to Nerevar and the initiator of his pledge to the tribes. He wore his Wraithmail headdress to battle at Red Mountain, and beheld the defeat of Dumac Dwarf-Orc, but was struck blind by the Voice of the Nordic champion, a frost devil and mockery of the Scarab. His mind was blasted into the Wraithmail by the foreign Tongue and the witness of Nerevar's murder, and he abandoned the three usurpers to live amongst the ashlanders until his death. Now those Thousand Ringlets of that coif are scattered to the winds, and the Ushilaku hold but two. At times you will come across an outcast in the wastes who wears the voice and truth of Alandro Sul about his ear, but his Speakers can let his voice flow through them at will. Not all the knowledge of the tribes is passed down through dream and memory. We see through the eyes of one who lived to see the Sun's Death, wisdom more perfect and pure than any Temple tome.”

“And why would he rouse himself to aid me?”

“Perhaps, Naleva Polefel, he saw something in you that we do not. Likely Azura means for you to speak to Nibani Maesa, if not because you are the Nerevarine, then at least to aid the Velothi in some small way, and serve your own place in the web of prophecy. So go, and see what the dream-seer will make of you. It seems that the Prince of Plots names you daughter as well.”

I quit the yurt without asking where the wise woman could be found. Hainab had already departed in that perfunctory, personable way of hers, an inadvertent cipher. At least it seemed that my two visits to the ashkhan had lessened the insult and occasion of my presence slightly, and I was able to ascertain the location of my destination with a simple question. Or three questions, rather, because only Kurapli the trader spoke my language. And the wise woman's yurt was obvious in retrospect, as the only non-utilitarian dwelling, with esoteric iconography all over it. I won't say that the dwelling stank, but the bizarre scents of the hanging herbs and (pale blue) cookfire was a nose-curling hodgepodge and far from pleasant. The reaction settled down somewhat, however, as my senses gradually ceased sounding the alarm.

Presenting Nibani Maesa herself, the final objective of all the sweat and skin shed in the past days' storms, all the nervous assaults on the tribe's hostility, and my resolution on suicide in the darkness of the burial caverns. The dream-seer is younger than I would have thought, perhaps of an age with Sul-Matuul in years, yet far his junior by the scale of time spent withering in the ashlands. Her braided hair is white, but she has the skin of a settled Dunmer, almost, with a face that hasn't yet reached middle age. The bridge of her nose is wide and flat, reminding me of a face I've seen on a Nibenean tiger. That moment's scrutiny loses me the initiative, and she opens fire as I enter the yurt.

“So. They've told me of you, outlander. Or, shall I say, Clanfriend. You are hard-headed. And ignorant. But perhaps it is not your fault. My lord ashkhan says you will ask me about the Nerevarine prophecies. He also says I will test you against them. I am the dream-seer of the prophecies, and do not take orders from my champion on this point.”

"He is your lord and your champion at the same time?" Something tells me a fumbling attempt at proper address will earn me no credit here.

"Yes. A simple arrangement. Now, we have business. I will honor Sul-Matuul's request, so first you should learn of the prophecies." She gestures for me to be seated on a cushion, and I comply, only for her to remain standing overhead, talking heedlessly.

"I thank you. So far I have only read the Stranger."

"Nothing will be read here. You must try to remember, not to record, because there are many Nerevarine prophecies, and they suggest many things. Aspect and uncertain parents. The Moon-and-Star. Sleepers. Seven curses. The curses' bane." Each item elicits a different small motion of her hands, a different cast to her head. Perhaps sort of mnemonic device? "There is the prophecy of the Stranger, which every Velothi child knows. There is also the Seven Visions, which is known to some. And finally the lost prophecies."

"So there are three prophecies?"

"No. Three *groups* of prophecy. The Stranger is simple and complete, suggestive of the others. But the Seven Visions prophecy, which I know and will teach you, is meant to be paired with the Seven Curses, which I know not. And then there are those prophecies which were lost, and no one knows their arrangement. To truly behold the rise of the Nerevarine, all of the verses would need to be collected, I think."

"And you will share the Seven Visions." I try to sound grateful. "You do me honor."

"Not yet. You do not even understand the Stranger. How could you?" She drops down to her knees and recites it then and there, words flowing from her lips with a cadence that suggests familiarity that goes beyond simple memorization. It is ingrained in her very flesh. A pause to think.

"I suppose the first line is generic?"

"You may suppose, Naleva Polefel. But heed the second. 'Sleepers serve the seven curses. A reference to another of Azura's promises. And who serves them? The servants of the Sharmat, those who have been tempted and overthrown by his dreams and soul sickness.'"

"This is familiar," I cut in. "These past months now, settled Dunmer are attacking outlanders in the name of the Sixth House, and the dreams are being spread by ash figurines of Dagoth Ur."

"It may be a sign of the Nerevarine, outlander. But not a sign that *you* are the Nerevarine. Perhaps the time of the Nerevarine has come. And you have come at the same time. This is not passing a test. But it may mean you have some part to play in the coming of the Nerevarine. Sul-Matuul thought as much, though I cannot tell why."

"Perhaps because I told him of my dreams. The Sharmat named me Nerevar, bid me join him at Red Mountain to shed my skin and drive the outlanders from Resdayn."

"And yet *you* are an outlander. It is a very good lie. A cunning dream to stir hearts, spoken in the voice of prophecy. The dream of the Nerevarine is very strong and very dangerous, for you, and for all my people. The Sharmat offers you eternal life, but you risk your soul to listen to him."

"Azura also visited me once, and told me to be watchful."

"I am a dream-seer, and less easily convinced of such things than Sul-Matuul, who has a romantic heart. But I will not discourage you from following the missives of your sleeping mind. You should listen to the Seven Visions."

"Does the rest of the Stranger mean anything I should know?"

"It is plain that you have already interpreted it, taking the uncertain parents and birthsign to refer to yourself. But the middle stanza is broad, and meaningless by itself. The reference to the curse's bane is inscrutable, and the third stanza merely references the process of following the prophecies itself. Nothing verifies you. You should hear of the Seven Visions, which refer to as many trials, and then we can be done with this exercise."

"Very well. I will listen and try to remember." She shrugs at my words, as if retaining the prophecy is irrelevant.

"What he puts his hand to, that shall be done. What is left undone, that shall be done."

"Do all the prophecies refer to a man?"

"Peakstar was no man," she replies. "But then again she was not Nerevar either. I would not worry about this least of your inadequacies... First Trial. *On a certain day to uncertain parents, Incarnate moon and star reborn.* This references the Stranger, clearly. But there Nerevarine will also bear the symbol of his progenitor, the Moon-and-Star ring. You do not have it, so you cannot be the one. Second, *Neither Blight nor age can harm him. The Curse-of-Flesh before him flies.* So possibly the Nerevarine will come as a spirit who is immune to Blight or age."

"And the Curse-of-Flesh?"

"I think this refers to the soul sickness corpus. It may be that the Nerevarine will heal this disease, or that its cure will be a sign of his coming. I do not know. Listen to the third trial: *In caverns dark Azura's eye sees, and makes to shine the Moon-and-Star.* The latter is clear reference to Nerevar's ring, but could mean any number of things. As for the 'caverns dark,' in legend there is a shrine to Azura called the Cavern of the Incarnate. There are secrets I may not tell you about this cavern. Do not ask."

I guess Clanfriend only gets you so far, then.

"And the fourth trial?"

"A stranger's voice unites the Houses. Three Halls call him Hortator. A Hortator is a war-leader chosen when the House people put aside their normal feuds to face a common enemy. It has not happened since the Empire came. Fifth, *A stranger's hand unites the Velothi. Four Tribes call him Nerevarine.*"

"So he must unite the Velothi? This is beginning to sound political as well as spiritual."

"Just the ashlanders, who are the true Velothi no matter how the term is used elsewhere. There are many tribes, but perhaps it is no coincidence that at present four are larger than the others. Urshilaku, Ahemmusa, Zainab, and Erabenimsun. It would truly be a miracle to unite those who have raided and warred with one another for so long. But the Nerevarine must be one who performs miracles."

So there's the rub. Miracles and politics. That'll go over like a Suthay-raht at a Trans-Niben rally.

"Number six. *He honors blood of the tribe unmourned. He eats their sin, and is reborn.* Once again, the wording is familiar, but uncertain. The 'tribe unmourned' may mean House Dagoth, which was exterminated after the Battle of Red Mountain. But it may also mean the Dwemer. And 'eating sin' is doing atonement for another's sin. There are two more verses."

"I think I will remember them." Some pride in my voice. This memory of mine would make me a good wise woman.

"His mercy frees the cursed false gods, Binds the broken, redeems the mad. The false gods are of course the Tribunal, necromancers who murdered Nerevar so they might usurp the daedric ancestors. 'Binds the broken' must refer to Nerevar's broken promise to honor the ways of the Spirits and rights of the Land, while the Sharmat himself is mad."

"So those are the seven trials."

"But with One Destiny. *He speaks the law for Veloth's people. He speaks for their land, and names them great.* That you are even here makes plain why this last is necessary. Had not the false gods debased our land before the Empire so, you would not have ever been born as what you are."

"Born as I am, you promised to test me against the prophecies nonetheless."

"And so I just have. No dream reflection is needed here. You are not the Nerevarine."

So that's that, Caius old pal. I hope you'll still pay me from time to time, for old time's sake.

"But I will not say that you cannot become the Nerevarine." She stands, and turns to her table full of alchemical items. "It is a puzzle, and a hard one. But you have found some of the pieces, and you may find more. If you so choose, there is a path before you. A path of knowledge, not of

attainment. If you bring me more of the prophecies, then we will know whether or not this is a mockery of Azura's promise.”

Well that's a different answer entirely.

“More of the prophecies?”

“Those that were lost, yes. The dream-seers are the memory of the Velothi, but a faulty one. Less worthy wise women may forget; more rigorous ones may die without finding a suitable air. And in centuries past, whole tribes have been wiped out. Of the lost prophecies I know nothing, but I have heard that the Seven Curses may be kept hidden by the Temple. Or perhaps the heretic priests harbor them. In any case, you alone must search. If you do find some of our lost wisdom, then your claim will be the stronger for it, and I shall be your guide.”

I took the time after that to say farewell to Hainab, thanking her for the hospitality. Of course, the gesture was neither anticipated nor appreciated, and I recalled right in the middle of the camp just to give the wrinkly bastards something to remember me by.

I'm sure you're curious, so I'll say that there really is nothing to the act of disappearing. In about two heartbeats the world fades out, slightly preceded by a sensation of weightlessness, and you're on your way. It's the arrival that can go suck on a guar teat. There's no pain, nor any nausea like the mage-types talk about. But the sudden realization that your soul and half your senses exist inside your little toe, only to start an upward rippling journey through the rest of the disgusting reconstituting meatbag you realize your body is while your destination phases in around you, now that's an experience sufficiently distasteful to bring on some sort of minor existential crisis. Nowadays I prefer to recall falling-down drunk.

Drunken travel is, however, a major limitation when you are using a Tribunal temple as a landing point. And so I showed up in the courtyard of the Gnisis shrine completely sober, vision coming back after everything else as it always does. I didn't want to stay at a strange inn with the ebony staff begging everything male and brawny within a ten mile radius to rob me, so I made straight for the strider, and slept all the way to Ald'ruhn.

Most southbound passengers disembark at the smaller strider port near the temple, but there was absolutely nowhere I wanted to be that wasn't a bed in the Lucky Lockup, so I rode the bug down the Odai to be offloaded with the rest of the cargo. The place was sad and lonely without Todwendy (whom it occurs to me I have no way of contacting) and Chuna. But there was a bath, that marvelous institution as devised by the solid citizens of High Rock, and for at least an hour all was well with the world.

I didn't end up reporting in to Caius for a full day, since coming down from the Urshilaku trek was a process requiring more than soapy water, and there was no timeframe attached to my errand anyway. After spending absolutely all of the money I had preserved from Zabamund, I made for the Mages Guild with the ebony staff. It proved an excellent choice of venue for selling it, for they were keenly interested, but also a rather poor one, since it seemed to have belonged to the organization at some distant point in the past. For a few shallow breaths I thought that the glowering Dunmer was going to seize it from me. I have bested sellswords, brigands and the undead, but the paralysis trick wouldn't stop a real spellcaster from spraying my spleen all over the wall at thirty paces.

Having convinced the mages to purchase the staff with weekly installments, I traded the first payment for the largest full soulgem I could find, and set about duplicating the levitation enchantment. Not wanting to rely on their robed hostility for help with the delicate operation at the imbuing altar, I

attempted it myself. In absence of any guidance, the duplication was less neat than I could have hoped, and the strength of the levitation charm not up to snuff with the potency of the soulgem. But that is the disappointment that set in months later. Dibby's Cooch, now this CiCi can go and play tag with the cliff racers!

The limitation is that I have to be holding the hilt of my spearpoint. I would have imbued an article of clothing or bauble of some sort, but small, floppy objects are difficult to focus on. A weapon has a presence, stemming from its unmistakable identity and purpose, and as an enchanter I still lack finesse. The mages took the staff off my hands after that, with an absurd amount of money in the offing. If they try to stiff me, I can always prove the shared lineage of my shortsword and their staff by displaying the contours of the charm to an expert in court.

And then it's off to see Caius. As I near the upper terraces at the northeast of town, sucking on marshmerrow, a familiar Argonian steps into my path. For a moment my good mood welcomes Chuna, but oh hell, it's just Nine-Toes.

"I see have deigned to pay us a visit," he gurgles.

"Assuming he'll have me."

Nothing but a glare (I think) in response. I push past him without another word, reflecting that I am not the least professional member of the Blades in Balmora today. The door to the bread-and-basket squats under the hill where it always does, unlocked and dingy.

And what a sight. Caius must be coming down off a sugary couple of days, assuming that his habit isn't maintained by smoke and mirrors even for my benefit. His eyelids are pasted to the inside of his head, and his eyes have another layer of misted covering that developed in the morning. As I enter, he tries to shed all the crust and haze, searching for that perch from which he coolly handles our business, the disinterested, mentorly management of his most unorthodox agent.

"Wearing a shirt today, I see." I regret the words but not the tongue that loosed them. I've stared some things down in the past week.

"Naleva..." I seemed to have interrupted his planned address. "Come to report on Sul and... the ashlanders."

"Back from Urshilaku, yes." I can say what I like here. "Won their trust in a grudging sort of way, and interviewed Nibani Maesa."

"And?" It's clearly all that comes to Caius' mind. Speaking in this state must be shameful to him. Am I late? Did he think me dead?

"And I'm not the Nerevarine." Full stop. "The signs the Emperor had from his mothball mumblers were valid, but there's a lot more to the prophecies than that. There are qualifications. An aspirational thing, really, and some of the requirements are just obscure, but others are unattainable."

"I see." Those sharp eyes revive a little, flashing from the depths.

"She didn't say that I cannot become the Nerevarine, but all in all this is a good place to drop the matter. We can't proceed without the prophecies that were lost, and if I go much further, I might end up getting arrested by the Temple as False Incarnate, or start a revolt against the occupation, or something."

"There is no occupation," Cosades replies, seeming to rally through the political point of order. "And as the originator of your orders, I disagree with your assessment. Without unduly exposing yourself to the Temple or... native expectations, you will carry on as if Maesa's counsel had been more favorable. Specifically, we will undertake a search for the remaining verses, which I have reason to believe are more taboo than lost. Illiterate ashlanders are not a good source on the existence or nonexistence of knowledge."

I (almost) begin to bristle at those words. Sure, I'll look for your bad poems and sure, the ashlanders are illiterate, but the emphasis on that fact has raised some fledgling Dunmeri prickliness. Nerevar can stay in the ground where the Tribunal put him, but my search has buried me in the dusty midst of the fatherland in curious ways. Every hard-won victory over the defenses thrown up by these

singularly unpleasant people (and the least friendly of all, the nomads) endears them to me a little more. Any developing affinity is just that—socially and linguistically I remain a clueless CiCi—but more and more I like to look at Dunmereth from afar and admire. The ashlanders in particular deserve their prophesied salvation. Even if the stipulation concerning outlanders (which I have yet to see textual or prophetic evidence of) would be better turned against their land-hungry settled cousins.

And oh, hell, I haven't answered Caius. Consider that momentary advantage forfeit.

“Righto then, boss. What's next?” Yep, he's fully revived now.

“The Legion has discovered a Sixth House nest on the Bitter Coast. Before they smash up the place and cover everything useful with their boot tracks, get on over there and make sure you're on hand to see things for me. You'll find Raesa Pulia at Fort Buckmoth. Enlist her cooperation in my name.”

I nod and stalk over to my storage chest. Precious few drakes left in there.

“Blight potions,” I utter, and jerk my thumb towards the bare belt where my purse used to be. Be damned if I'm taking another of those Tribunal baths, not unless there's a girl attendant instead. The Master of Blades doles out a few coins and is rid of me, probably with some satisfaction.

So you see, I didn't bother about Lord Nerevar for a while, because the other side got a crack at me first.

If Ald'ruhn is venerably rugged, Fort Buckmoth is just miserable. Security there tends towards lax, though, and I gained entrance to the fortified plateau without challenge. Raesa Pulia, Imperial officer of so-and-so (who proved suspiciously attractive for a Legionary), told me that a detachment had already been sent to clear the nest. Apparently the Sixth House keeps a shrine in the sea caves of Ilunibi, just north of Gnaar Mok. In order to catch up with the Legion force, Pulia granted me—of all the damndest things—a mule, with instructions to leave it at the ranger post on the edge of the West Gash. Bitter Coast grasses, like most native plants, tend to sicken western livestock, so the Legion's tiny complement of horses and draft animals eat imported oats by the drakeload.

With protective burlap wrapped around its idiot head, the benighted animal saw me through to the sweetlands, where it resolutely insisted on suicidal grazing. The garrison at the outpost will find out whether a few stolen mouthfuls of Vvardenfell grass is fatal or not. Either way, I'll be down in the marsh, picking my way from roadsign to roadsign. Although I have since mastered the use of the treasure that is a good map, at the time Tamriel to me was merely a spider's web of points, connected by straight lines between cities, with signs at every crossroads. Since Cheydinhal I have been good at navigating by feel, but when venturing into the unknown, all you can do is look for something to point the way, and then keep along the stepping stones until you get there.

And there were literal stepping stones involved on the walk to the palpably uninteresting hamlet of Gnaar Mok. Planks spread from rock to tussock, balance-beams over the stretches of putrid water in those festering marshlands. Before long I was questioning my memories of that first day in Vvardenfell. The Bitter Coast is only appealing after you leave.

A barroom Orsimer knew the way to Ilunibi because the caves wind down under the base of Khartag Point (this last pronounced rapturously). The Legion detachment, however, had already gone on to sort the place out. Oh well, if the tinheads have already finished the job, at least I'll see this Khartag Point that's so interesting, right? But it proves to be nothing more than a precipitous headland capped by a smooth boulder, sitting just across the water from Ilunibi's peninsula and marking the northern edge of the Bitter Coast region. Apparently its fame stems solely from the fact that some fool orc once jumped off it, probably purely out of bellicosity, to challenge its great height. A thin trail of cookfire smoke marks the Legion camp at the entrance of Ilunibi, so I suppose we'll have to tackle the place together. Odd that they haven't gone in yet—

And so they have. Only one man sits among the bedrolls, motionless and draped in a blanket. There's a single pauldron and greave in the mud at his feet, but that is the sum total of war gear in the camp. Plenty of noise I'm making, as I slosh through the wet reeds, but this legionary isn't challenging me. Within a dozen paces now, and the stench arrives. He smells like a guar tannery, although to compare that reek to such a life-sustaining operation is outrageous.

"You a'right, soldier?" He is clearly conscious, shivering slightly as I approach and orbit his blanketed form at arm's length. It's a young one, a single specimen out of the thousands of Colovian farm boys who form the core of the Legion (no matter what the Nords and Orcs say). He has sandy hair and a few facial scars from the pox the whores gave him, but it's an absolute wonder that I notice those minute blemishes at all. Maybe I was looking for something human amidst the great swathes of boiling, putrefying flesh, the skin lifting off in sheets atop soaring bulges of malevolent growths and tumors. Even the first time, I recognize corpus. The poor bastard is riddled with it; the affliction runs down his left side in a great band, like a furnace operator caught in a sudden blast. His shoulder and thigh have swollen too horrifically to remove the rest of his armor, the bloody bloated limbs bursting from the gaps in the steel like bricks forced into oozing mud.

It takes me a few revolted seconds to realize that he is speaking. Chanting, really. Not so quietly as to explain my lack of recognition, and singsong, at a great pace indifferent to the meaning of the words.

"*Will be one—with him—in the flesh. Will be one—with him—in the flesh.* All will be—one—with him..."

And of course it is last of all that I notice the main thing. He has slit his own wrists beneath the blanket, letting the rough fabric absorb the pints spilled and those to follow. Not the most heroic death for a legionary, even by the standards of suicides, yet at least he won't have made a botch job of it with that sharp gladius of his. Here's hoping that blood loss is also fatal to what he has started to become. And let's doubly hope that the rest of the patrol that never made it out were put down for good and won't rise back up.

"Arkay take you, brother."

Shit. Now what? I can see the entrance to Ilunibi, a jumbled collection of rocks with waves breaking over them. Can Buckmoth spare enough men for a full assault now that they've lost the last dozen? Did these have to swim down? Somehow I end up at the edge of the hole in the shoreline. So that's how you have a cave in all this damp silt...

A shelf of Vvardenfell's volcanic foundation reaches out from Khartag Point to the layered mud of the marshes, a natural tunnel with its mouth just at sea level. Or below it, really. It is almost high tide with full Secunda and new Masser, so the water rises right over the lip of the hole. Only the largest swells flood the entrance, but even without any waves at all, a trickle runs downward, forming a salty waterfall into the misted, briny darkness.

If you want to know why I went in alone, that's a damned good question. I think I knew I was invited.

It was seawater, but it was not cold. Naleva waded in past her knees, noting the growth of scum on the walls, which indicated that the cavern could fill to neck-height. She tested the depth with the butt end of her spear (pack and ashlands gear having been left at the camp above). Sometimes it meant holding the blade, but the paralyzing enchantment in the blunt haft afforded some sensation resembling touch. The tidal pool extended only until the first bend, where the soft red glow of the candles began. Sparkling in the pulsing, ruddy light, the water rushed into a gap in the floor, welling downward in a foot-deep whirlpool to feed Vvardenfell's stone bowels. *The water of the Wakened Lord*. Dagoth Ur did not speak to her then, but for a moment she thought he had. The presence and the promise lay all about

the place.

After that the way was dry. A short clamber onto a low ledge and the cavern dove again, with candles along the walls every few feet. Their warming glow struck her as hostile and at the same time soothing. On the left step the malice of a sleeping demon, on the right the welcoming decorations of a cheery brothel. Like in Suran.

The tunnel went on and Naleva with it, no longer descending but running under the bay, until the mass of Khartag Point overhead pulled at her compass needle. Her fingers itched to rise, to grasp the hilt of her spearpoint blade and levitate through solid rock to the sky above. There was fear, as there had been at Arkngthand and Urshilaku, but as always, it was the fear that comes too late, not quite real until danger declares itself. And besides, she was expected, and here was the invitation. A single, somber beat of bell, immensely sonorous and deep, welling up from far away. A bleached door stood decomposing before her, and Naleva went in.

Now the red candles expanded to swaddle the caverns, filling from floor to ceiling the undulating artery it had become. Another bell sounded, one note higher and seemingly a half mile closer. The doorman stepped out to greet her, two curved scepters of office in his hands. He had no eyes or teeth, and wore only a billowing loincloth over his ashy skin (ashy in ways that could never apply to a waking Dunmer). Naleva almost struck him down before it became clear that he did not threaten. The guiding presence was simply there, making Ilunibi plain to her by the essence of friendship past and future, and by the dreams they had shared.

The doorman drew himself back (the slash wounds of the Legionaries still adorned his bloodless chest) and blasted Naleva with a torrent of screaming light from the filled holes in his face. The brilliant rays did not make her blink. They marked her as a guest, and she heard only music. Naleva passed him by, and the doorman donned a beaked mask in recognition. Farther beyond the entrance now, through the rough chambers of the shrine, all with their names on the lips of the Dreamers that waited to greet her. *And he has dubbed it the Carcass of the Saint, the antechamber of the Marowak's Spine, and the Tainted Marrow. All welcome you to Soul's Rattle.* Men and women they were, the truest of the Dunmer. Their eyes were open and clear, reflecting only the ecstasy of their waking dreams. All went naked, black bodies young and old, hard and soft, awaiting as unmolded clay the grace of their Lord. Naleva walked through a rank of them, and they dropped their bone or chitin clubs as she brushed against their sides. Their older cousins stood behind, in smaller numbers. Having already offered up their faces, they were in the midst of their time of trial, ceaselessly begging their Lord to speak to them, in voices that only sounded in the crimson light of the caves. Naleva pitied them for their anguish, having vaguely recognized them as akin to Caius' night visitor, but wondered at the force that moved them, deprived as they were of eyes and mouth and brain. Again, the bell came higher and nearer.

She continued on with the spear held loosely in her hand, overawed by the combined pulsing force of prayer and vision, knowing only to progress and above all to see. So she saw. To each chamber a different purpose, marked by naught but an ash statue which was itself a candle, providing the rarefied illumination of every sacrament. The first room Naleva passed contained a stone slab and three Dreamers, transformed by the sendings into competent nurse-priests and attendants for the young woman prone on her basalt bed. Naleva rested on her spear to watch as the Dreamer girl lay back and writhed. Her lithe little form shone with sweat, dripping moisture like a coat of pitch. Toes curling on the edge of the stone, she shrieked as if at climax, her nipples two points of sparkling light. Naleva could not turn away, afraid to enter the room but straining to catch a glimpse of the girl's face through the soaking tangle of coffee-colored hair.

The fourth bell sounded, and one of the attendants exited the chamber carrying a shallow bowl, passing with no acknowledgment of the armed guest. Naleva glanced into the container and saw only fingernails and an eyeball floating in half an inch of stained liquid. Horrified unto panic, she whirled away down the corridor as the girl's moans grew louder. Tripping over a stray foot some other Dreamer

had shed, the realization came to her. The girl on the slab exulted to give of herself, to do away with her own form. Soon she would shed her cursed skin, and be born again in ash. Many more such sacrifices and revelries lay ahead in the cave. Even as the cold fear seized at Naleva's neck, she carried on. The arousal that had tickled into life earlier did not abate, but swelled as she saw more of Ilunibi. Her scalp crawled with revulsion, her underarms sweated terror, while the damp between her thighs added to the humming red moisture all around her.

Welcome, breathed the cave as the bells went on. Loincloth-wearing guardians intermingled with the naked Dreamers. Killing energy arced between their fingertips as they fell to the ground to prayer, or embarked on obsessive, pedantic rants in squealed tones, the refuse of their diseased, chaotic minds. Naleva took the tour. She saw half and understood all, how the statues called the dreams and the dreams found the lost or the weak or the hateful and reached out to them sleeping, until the dreams did not stop with morning and the newfound faithful came here to grow. How they gave up their eyes, and face, and hands, and attuned to the keening if they were worthy, to stave off the mindless compulsion and rampant deformities of corpus and rise as kin of House Dagoth. Then the new growth would spring from the old, the instrument of glorification unveiling itself from the sacrificial emptiness, and the power of its music. Eventually, they would shed all, Naleva realized, as their dreams and their song truly took hold, and the Heart-limb grew. They would discard all their bones, the remnants of their halved skull until the new life of Him existed totally, with no curse nor weakness nor fault to remain. And everywhere the flesh, the miracle of it seething and flowering like a rash, His flesh and His sinews, called by the lyrical perfection of His nightly promise. The orgasm of anger, the love of willing deprivation, humming with the tune of the Sharmat and the bloody tissues of the dead Scarab that sustained Him.

Then she came to the shrine Ilunibi. She came dragging her spear along the ground like a distracted child, and the last, highest bell called out as she entered. Dagoth Gares held the ringer—an immense ebony hammer—as he stood at the end of a long array on a dais. Between guest and host stood a tall ash statue, nearly the height of a Bosmer, venting divine steam in mockery of the Ghostfence, with a trio of three-sided monoliths placed about it, smaller figurines set into their crevices.

“Welcome!” he boomed. “I am Dagoth Gares, and this is my Lord's shrine. Here we partake in the worship of Dagoth Ur the Awakened, and dream His dreams in our bounty.” He set the hammer delicately alongside the bells and descended to bow before Naleva.

“The faithless name you differently, but I hail you as Nerevar, and would bid you to hear the message my Lord has given me to relay.”

Naleva does not seem to hear.

“Did you give your face?” she asks. No human feature graces Dagoth Gares' head, only a tentacle as thick as a burly arm, protruding grotesquely like the tail end of a Kwama forager.

“We children of His flesh, we are deep in the heart of His mysteries. Such fortunate ones as I, their bodies swell to contain His glories, and to yield the rich sacraments of our Lord's feasts. You see the beauty in our worship, I can tell.”

He draws close, robe rustling imperceptibly, to halt with his proboscis mere inches from Naleva's dazed face. Their breath mingles, and she does not pull back.

“Are you ready to give?” His voice slows to a hiss. “No, I think you are ready to appreciate but not to give. Nerevar was not one who gave.” His features open wide, the first sight to give her pause in some minutes, and he showers her with a prayer, a rush of pungent vapor that settles in her hair and eyebrows. She lets out a single, quiet cough.

Gares laughs—a happy sound—and steps to the center of the altar array, arms outstretched.

“Now then, are you ready to hear the words of Dagoth Ur, the most faithful of your companions and servants of old? For the friendship and honor you once shared, He would grant you power and grace, if you would only pledge that friendship anew. He says to you: *'The Sixth House was never dead*

but only sleeping. As you rise again, so do I. You struck me down as I guarded the treasure you bound me by oath to defend, but the greater betrayal went unpunished. Climb Red Mountain, to where we were both of us slain, and let us share our forgiveness. I would raise you high in my counsel."

His words echo away to nothing and he beckons, gesturing at the altar. Naleva advances with slow, soporific steps. Clearly, she is meant to kneel. She stoops to examine the howling statue and ends up lowering herself towards the cavern floor.

And then I dropped the spear. It slipped from my fingers for the barest of seconds and my hand (not exactly under my control at this point) caught it before the point touched the ground. The enchantment surged at my grasp. Whatever part of me that commanded it knew of the danger, and the smooth wooden haft inquired whether it would be needed soon. The rippling green energy of that weakness charm reminded me briefly of its origin, the lacquered mask and the brilliant flashing dark face of she who held it. In that selfsame motion I wrenched myself upright and twisted left, bringing all my weight behind the leaping blade as it bit drily into Gares' chest.

That did not finish him. He thrashed, raging as if I had stuck a kagouti on the end of a pine. I had to lunge forward, pushing the point farther in and twisting the blade as if pain could stop him. His throes almost tore my arms from their sockets but also succeeded in ripping half his midriff open. I chased him around the room with the impaling haft, through his feet barely left the spot. When it was over, he collapsed into the rack of bells, scattering and splintering them as if he weighed a few pounds more than a bull guar. The ponderous instruments lost their distinct voices as they fell, producing a riotous wave of sound that blew out the red candles and banished the steam of the altar. Their uproar did not echo so much as it progressed, step by step, all the way out of Ilunibi to the cave's mouth. Now I had to follow.

But first Dagoth Gares got his last words, a low cackle with a voice that had just begun to see paradise.

"You shall come to him, in his flesh, and of his flesh."

I listened well.

Departure came after, with hospitality revoked. The Dreamers rushed at me screaming, and I left the caverns running with their blood, so much blood that I thought myself back at the Polefel slaughterhouse, watching the Rumare froth red. Their blunted weapons came down hard, but most of them rushed straight into my spear. Those who had given eyes and faces proved a stiffer challenge, as putting them down meant exhausting minutes spent hacking and chopping with a weapon not designed for it, severing joints or just taking the torso apart until they retreated into piles of corpus carrion. Worst of all were the half-mad ash slaves who blazed at me with haloed fire and crackling nimbuses of encompassing energy, lashing me with magic when my paralyzing charges were too slow. I climbed out through the breaking waves at Ilunibi's mouth with leather jerkin reduced to melted tatters, the skin of my chest mortified and burnt. I do not think I would have survived such wounds had I been able to feel the pain. That is, if not for the corpus.

I collapsed as soon as sunlight hit my face, venting my stomach. My cheeks were already growing a thin crust, sloughing off the outer layers to make room for the Blighted stubble. I knew full well what was happening, perhaps better than any mortal alive at the time. Shrugging off the ruined armor, I donned the chitin helmet and abandoned the rest of my gear. The mudcrabs dragged the Legionary's body towards the water as my legs dragged in the direction Gnaar Mok.

The helmet was suffocating. It drew me quizzical, suspicious looks, which meant quickly making myself a curiosity before half the tiny town's population. I had downed the (useless, I knew) Blight potion, and it felt like coming back up. The master wasn't letting me on the knarr for Hla Oad, and I tore off the helmet to gulp fresh air and prove I wasn't a monster. Too bad for me, the real sticking

point was that I had lost all my money, and the Hlaalu town watchman accosted me then, probably wondering if I was some sort of Camonna Tong fugitive. He recognized the corpus and had me run out of town ahead of a stone-throwing mob. That left the ranger station with the mule, and lone miles of Bitter Coast with evening coming down.

I missed it by miles, of course, and spent the night curled up beneath a roadside hollow. A family of Vvardenfell rats called it home, but vacated in a panic, probably never to return. That night was all dreams, dreams of music.

And oh, what music! To call it otherworldly would be a crime against language. Hellishly beautiful, maybe that's a start. I heard the power and truth not meant for the ears of mortals, the work of the Dwarves and their inadvertent student Dagoth Ur, his ash poets, the children of his flesh with fell bagpipes for faces. It grieves me that I could not then identify a single note of the simplest children's song, leaving me no tools with which to describe it. Even my subsequent inquiries into the mechanics of the art, however, have yielded no concepts nor terminologies that could hope to apply to the reality of what I heard. Much later, at the Duke's court, I listened to the resident musicians discussing the trends and counter-movements of the Winterhold Bards College. Those preening fools thought that they knew *music*!

Dagoth Ur did not deign to speak with me that night. I was left with the generic compulsions of the corpus, wondering in brief lucid snatches what treasure Voryn had defended and why he accused Nerevar of killing him for it. Those questions eventually faded into the clattering of a guar-drawn cart, a contraption favored by the more westward-looking Hlaalu merchants (albeit those who can't afford strider service or never trade the trackless routes). The last traces of the music still whistled in my ears as I approached the wagon, neglecting to leave my spear reassuringly in the grass. The lone driver looked at me askance but halted at my hail. The load of lumber in back was clearly someone else's paid cargo, so he wasn't too cautious.

"Well met." There was something foreign in my voice, but I could not decide what. "Pray take pity on a weary traveler and allow me to ride in back for Balmora."

"I'm fer Caldera, and besides if I let on everyone who's asking, I'd have a cargo of charity cases and a dead guar."

"Oh, no one else will get on." The words come out sinister, and I look him in the face despite myself.

"Alma protect! What'd I leave the wastes for? Get away, you doomed—"

"I NEED, to go, to *Balmora*!" I slam my hand down on the seat as I shout, and the board pops loose from its fastening to catapult the driver into the road. The guar startle and begun pulling, so I swing up onto the vacant platform, tossing the loose seat into the dust as we accelerate. My hand feels broken. So I have a monster's strength now. Stands to reason.

Flaying the guar, I pound through Caldera, with its pretentious manor, misplaced houses and air of smoky subterranean suffering. Perhaps they would appreciate the Sharmat's brawn in a miner. Could probably make a few drakes before the first pustules break out. That Legion boy had it set in quick, but maybe he caught it something fierce. It would make sense for the Nerevarine to get a special dose, but I doubt it will be long before Naleva disappears beneath all the drooling and biting.

Ravenous hunger had set in by the time the cart pulled within sight of Balmora, but it was the kind that made the living guar look good, and I ignored it. Vehicles are usually stopped at the gate, so I abandoned the cart behind the temple (downwind of me for the first time, the beast began to panic) and entered on foot. As it happened, striding into town with a full helm, a naked spear and no other armor attracted even more comment, and one of the bonemold guardsmen caught up with me at the Odai canal.

“What's under the helmet, citizen?” These Hlaalu grunts talk like Nibennium city watch now.

“The face that ate out your mother. Go catch some pickpockets or else leave me in peace.”

I don't know if the affliction made me aggressive or just stupid. But the armored figure grabbed my helmet by the rear peak and tried to yank it from my shoulders. Of course these damn sweetlanders wouldn't know how to remove a wastes helm if it bit them in the stones. Instead I sent him careening clear across the street with the butt of my spear, no paralysis charm, just a crushing blow clattering his armor along the paving stones like a handful of oversized dice. A pair of Fighters Guild members—may Molag Bal bugger them and their busybody comrades—saw the brief affray and rushed to intervene. Still a hundred yards from the bridge, I seized my charmed blade by the stubby crossguard and floated over the Odai, surprising a gondolier so badly that he let a silt strider's foreleg capsize his craft. Levitating took about as long as swimming would have (minus the sheer canal walls), but my airborne caper left the pursuers far behind. Whatever corpus did to my coordination, it did not inhibit my ability to run. I paralyzed two more guardsmen on the way, rapping them about the legs as I ran past. I don't know whether they would have chased me otherwise, but like I said: stupid.

With seconds left before the fighters ran into sight, I found Caius' door locked and barred. Simple problem, simple solution, I broke it down on the third kick, not expecting to find Nine-Toes within, aiming a crossbow at me. He took one look at my face and that was the only time I have seen an Argonian visibly blanch. I rushed at the stale bread on the table; he made for the exit. Having wolfed down the food, I propped the door back up against its frame and curled up in Caius' bed (it has held far worse) with eyes tight shut and heart beating loud.

After a number of quiet minutes during which the more immediate fear was only replaced by another sort of irresistible, upwelling dread, I heard Caius outside, bribing away the Hlaalu. His face was already white when he entered, with Nine-Toes' anxious feet scratching on the clay steps outside.

“Naleva! Report.” Oh, damn him. But bless him, too. I think it's the only thing he possibly could have said without shattering my composure and his.

“Legion's a no-go, boss. Took out that nest myself.” A note of satisfaction in my voice. It *is* true, and whatever actions in Ilunibi that need to be forgotten, I'm paying for them now.

“I—stay there. I need to see Antabolis, then we'll move on this.” He waves a commanding hand at me, already on the way out.

“I 'ant goin... nowhere.” There's a churning in my gut again, coupled with waves of intense fatigue. Cosades skids to a halt and sticks his head back around the doorframe.

“Do you have long, do you know?”

“*NO.*”

Darkness.

There are snatches after that. Pain in my hand, that Altmer from the Balmora Mages Guild casting Restoration spells at my chest and having them rebound. Caius explaining that he had threatened the robes sufficiently to send me to Sadrith Mora through the guide portal. Antabolis looking on, fascinated and concerned. Someone pressing a metal object into my hands, some Dwemer artifact worth its weight in gold. Of the journey itself, nothing.

As for all the rest, it was naught but waking dreams, always punctuated by that awful music, and visions of a Dwemer chamber sunk deep in the mountain, a stunning woman holding a pair of severed feet, a warrior's eyes melting in a blast wave of pure sound, and a strange-proportioned man, all of brass.

As the boat (what boat?) crunched to a halt in the gravel, someone took the spear from my hand. I shrieked then, lay back and keened like the naked girl in Ilunibi. If things got too far gone, I would need it to float up and smash myself on a menhir. And in the meantime, I would need it to fly. To fly?

So Caius must have told me about Tel Fyr and its master Divayth. At that, I caught my first glimpse of a Telvanni tower, and the music abruptly stopped. The boat full of Blades (or whoever they were) was rowing away, leaving me alone with the big twisting structure and its turret-pods of living fungus.

A female voice called me inside, through those cunning circular Telvanni doors that I still do not completely understand. She's pretty, this one, and not bothering to keep a safe distance. Asking me if I need a spell. Are the dreams going to stop so long as I'm here? No, I can fly myself. Now how do I get to him? She points at the ceiling, which isn't there because it's a hallway, a flywell. Rising to the upper levels is a soothing exercise, and the woman who impatiently calls down to me is attractive too (I hope Aetherius is like this). Her face is completely unlike the doorkeeper downstairs, right down to hair and eye color, but there is some ineffable, eerie similarity as well. Addled as I am, the thought prevents me from acknowledging the presence of Divayth Fyr, who now that I do notice him appears to slow the progress of his immense age by going about in Dremora(!) plate armor like a young idiot. I dumbly proffer the precious Dwemer gadget, which I only then realize is Antabolis' puzzle box.

"And who is it that imagines I require such lavish gifts in order to treat the afflicted at my corpusarium?"

Corpusarium. That's like sanitarium, which means I'll stay here until I die. At least the girls will be nice to look at once I have legs like tree-trunk sausages. Some of Caius' words come back to me. 'It's a swell place. Full of doomed crazy people with bloated bodies. You'll love it.'

"I dunno, boss." The room around me is becoming clearer, but the mind isn't all there yet. "Oh! I mean... Naleva."

"Welcome to Tel Fyr then, Naleva. I won't mock you by asking why you are here. Would you like to know what happens next?"

"Ya." I forget how many thousands of years lie under that iron belt of his, but he talks like a young man. He and that goatee of his.

"The inmates dwell in the Tower's root caverns. Not quite in comfort, but in safety. And in whatever manner of peace is possible for them, the poor brutes. Constant pain, ferocious appetites and passions. No reason at all. But marvelous too, in their own way. They'll live forever, barring accidents." By Mara, I guess you don't get this old by worrying about appearing callous. "Have you heard of the Nerevarine, Naleva?" He turns the puzzle box over in his hands, clearly stalling so he can inspect it further. "There are prophetic references to the Nerevarine being afflicted with corpus. Imagine those poor ashlanders' distress if I had their savior stuck down in the cellars, a fat, disgusting corpus monster. And made as a marsh rat!"

"Hilarious." There is something sufficiently sharp in my tone to retrieve his attention.

"Truth be told, Naleva, I rarely receive patients such as yourself. Normally they come to me with the affliction more advanced. You haven't even begun to lose your color yet."

So that's the first symptom? I wonder what he would think of the spell wounds and battered hand that healed overnight. "Although the others might recognize you as one of their own, sooner or later they would rip you apart quite accidentally, in your weakened state."

"Weakened?"

"Mortal, if you will. Corpus is, of course, a loathsome disease. But it is a blessing as well as a curse. The victim partakes of divine essence, no longer a being solely of themselves. Infection means being molded by wondrous forces, in ways no mortal science or art can match. All this means very little if you are the one suffering, but still... corpus is a profound and glorious mystery, quite worthy of a lifetime of study."

"I congratulate you on your chosen hobby." He drops the puzzle box into a chest which opens at the approach of his hand, then shuts, locks and whirs as the trap is engaged. The shelves above it hold what I imagine are the choice titles of an expansive library, plus a few ironbound skulls.

"As luck would have it, Naleva, I have been searching for newly-infected specimens of late. I said I would tell you what happens next, so listen here. I will send you down to the corpusarium to get

a feel for the place, and to run an errand for me. That will give you a fair chance to decide whether or not you want to spend your last lucid days in comfort and hospitality up here until it is time to live down below.”

“Or...”

“Or if you would rather take a short tonic treatment this very afternoon. It will very likely kill you, but hope springs eternal and I value the offer of choice.”

We lock eyes for a few moments before it appears that I am not expected to answer.

“Alfe, my girl, send our guest down to Beyte. My boots should be finished by now. Then hurry along back.” He shoots her an unmistakable look on the way out of the chamber. Alfe, for her part, simply points down the hole where any normal person would have a staircase. The short sword falters on the way down, so I drop the last ten feet, startling Beyte.

“There you are! Follow me, please. Lord Fyr will want those fool boots of his.” We head down a sloping, tube-shaped hallway with organic rings set into the circumference every few steps like stumbling blocks.

“Are you two his wives?”

Her eyes go wide.

“Yes. But, well, not *wife* in the *married* sense. Consorts, you know. Because... well... he made us too, though, so we aren't really his daughters or anything. It's *like* we were. Because he made us, see?”

“No?”

She brushes it off and unlocks a sturdy round door.

“Go down through here and past the guards. In the Corprusarium you'll want to look for Yagrum Bagarn. He's a patient, and moves about on a four-legged walking chair contraption, so he won't be hard to find. Just keep straight on past the dangerous wards in front, all the way until you see a lighted area. That's his workshop. Uupse will be there too, so don't worry.”

“Uupse is your sister?”

Again, the confusion. At least I get one more laugh before the long night journey.

A mail-clad Argonian guards the next portal, which dwarfs him with its iron bulk and array of locks. Is this my new front door, and can visitors just come and knock?

“You, Dunmer, you don't look sick.” Sometimes the face-reading challenge is mutual. “Have you come to plunder the dungeon? I won't stop you if so, just leave that pig-sticker by the wall there.”

“Plunder the—the hell does that mean?” I draw closer and he seems to notice the grey about my gills. Are Argonians immune to the divine disease?

“My Lord Fyr stores his choicest morsels down in the corprusarium,” the gate guard explains with relish. “Sometimes he lets me fall asleep on watch so the thieves can get down there. Such sport. But few thieves will risk the worst plague known to the world outside the marsh, and fewer still enjoy being ripped in half. So we don't get many of the good thieves, like Fyr wants. Just the stupid ones.” With those rueful words, he releases the last of the locks.

Stairs, immediately, or something like them. A tight descending spiral formed of the tower's roots, three tendrils each thicker than the base of a Bitter Coast canopy tree. Some shallow steps have been cut into the growth that serves as the floor, depositing me in another cramped antechamber that hosts an immense violet crystal. The exposed section alone rises up to my eye-level, letting out a weltering hum as the Tower's tap roots wrap around it on their way through the floor. Such crystals are naturally-occurring, but the Telvanni find them and imbue them as soulgems, causing them to swell dramatically and fuel of the rampant growth of their Towers.

The caverns go on after that, with more fungal knees muscling through the ceiling like stone supports. Fyr built this place too, sculpting it to his liking. I hear water running someplace far off. Perhaps appropriately, his liking resembles Ilunibi (although the stone on the opposite coast is a different texture), minus the red candles. Some of the residents are similar too. The unworthy stalk the

halls, those who lacked the faith or strength to undergo rebirth in the Sharmat's grace. The unlucky are here too, those caught by chance with the disease used as a weapon, not a gift. It drives them at me, as if their ballooning, putrefying limbs could match my mortal speed. Some of these poor brutes must be older than Talos and Reman. You can tell them by the enormous scars they bear, from the tumors that Fyr amputated to keep them mobile.

There are several distinct wards to the corpusarium, and the inmates of each get progressively more docile. I don't know how Fyr sorts them, but it may have something to do with the odorless green vapor that hangs in the air, rising in volume as you progress to the deeper chambers. At the final ward, I see fires placed about the room, suggesting that the inmates here are capable of appreciating them (and not burning themselves). One such patient accosted me as I enter. Or should I say, stood before me on his emperor parasol stalk legs, peering into my eyes with silent, enormous pupils and toothy brows. I nodded at him, and he shambled away, reeking of rot and pathos. I'll make his acquaintance later.

In the grotto's rear, there is a welcoming orange glow. A small forge produces it, squatting up against a towering bronze cabinet. Divayth Fyr's oldest guest is immediately visible, a bulbous yellowy lump reflecting firelight, motionless atop a metal carriage. The conveyance's four legs are unmistakably Dwemeri, poised supporting his weight like a sleeping scarab. His eyes are closed as I approach, and he is enormously fat, arms dwarfed and legs enveloped, but otherwise not so distorted as the other old timers. His skin looks like a pale Ayleid's, and the beard is of a shape with one of the towers at High Fane.

"Yagrum Bagarn?" A pair of boots, armored and also Dwemer-made, rest on the curving shelf of his stomach.

The fat man opens one misted eye, shakes his head, and closes it again.

"This is indeed *Yagrum Bagarn*," says another of Fyr's not-daughters, rising from the bench where I had failed to notice her, "but you have pronounced it poorly."

"I see." Not quite to my taste, this one, but still a testament to Fyr's disturbing talents. "My name is Naleva Polefel."

"Uupse Fyr," she says quickly, then points at my feet. "Do bring that drum over with you."

I scoop up the little guarskin instrument and inch past Bagarn's bulk to hand it over. He seems to be asleep.

"Thank you. The rhythm soothes their nerves, and it's the best way of dealing with the patients when they become violent. The poor things enjoy it so much that they wander off with it sometimes."

"I always was one for music," I mutter, and Uupse looks at me with perhaps a touch more pity than I can handle. "Lord Fyr sent me to fetch his... boots... before beginning treatment." I turn back to the scarab-legged elf, who now frowns and favors me with a rather grumpy expression. "I apologize for so mangling your name, sir."

"He does not know your language, but may speak through me." A tender look for the bearded patient. "You may take the boots with you, if you are in a rush to leave. I expect we will come to know each other, for a time."

"I doubt I shall have the pleasure." Scarab-man seems incapable of lifting the boots himself, so I gingerly pluck them from his midriff. The Dwemeri metal has grown into his flesh slightly. "Lord Fyr is giving me a tonic, because my condition is not advanced."

Bagarn rouses himself at that, letting out a long, rippling cascade of syllables. I would describe it as evocative of strange runes, deceptive to the ear and impossible to even begin reduction to the Aldmeri alphabet, but such would best describe the ashlander tongues. He makes noise in his cheeks and deep in his throat, rocking slightly in his seat as if without manual evocation the meaning is incomplete. Uupse listens with her eyes fixed on the handle of the great cabinet, waits five breaths and then translates.

"The last living dwarf—" What? What?! "—begs the pardon of his gracious keeper, Divayth Fyr. 'These boots of flying may be repaired, but never made whole. The fundamental enchantment is

flawed, though perhaps sufficient for this latter, benighted age. It shames my race that we should be judged by the work of such lack-wit blunderers.' Please transmit this to Lord Fyr, Naleva."

"I'm sorry! But the last living—"

"Dwemer, yes. A guest of Divayth. I can see your curiosity but," her voice grows low and soft," though it pains me, if you are to try one of father's elixirs, you shall surely die within the day, and all your knowledge extinguished."

You can take your Dunmeri practicality and stuff it. But now I can't stop looking at Yagrum Bagarn. The hooded eyes, that beard, the scarab legs, I should have known. The boots are turning over and over in my hands, though two days ago they would have been too heavy to carry so lightly.

"When I'm gone, I won't rue the knowledge that goes with me."

"That is a sentiment familiar to the master of this place." Uupse seats herself on the small table. "If you should wish to spend your last hours in pursuit of learning, ask me your questions of him. He does enjoy speaking with informed visitors, for they come so infrequently."

Her words remind me what else I'd like to be in pursuit of, if this is my last day, but the curiosity remains strong.

"Is he truly the last of the Dwemer?"

"My friend does not enjoy idle questions," Uupse warns gently. "And address him directly. I shall translate, where possible."

I set down Fyr's boots, forgotten for the moment. Not even the enchantment—hugely stronger than the paltry levitation charm in my speartip—interests me.

"Tell Yagrum Bagarn, that his presence astounds me, as it would every child of far Nibennium who ever heard a folk story told." Even alien relics such as him have heard of the city. "And scholars too, the world over, would give half their libraries to meet you." Wait while she translates, a radically different language than what comes from the dwarf's mouth. Bagarn nods his head, like a duke hearing petition. "If it is not wearying, I would hear your story, how you came to be here, afflicted with the same divine disease as myself."

The usual delay, and Bagarn responds, something like satisfaction on his face.

"I welcome your companionship. The days pass slowly down here, and my fellow patients make for poor company. For centuries, my only consolation has been to with each waking mock the gods who destroyed my race, and condemned me to this bleak existence. I would gladly share my tale, but my memory fades, so know that it is not as long as it was."

"Nevertheless, many would ache to hear it."

"I served as one of Kagrenac's apprentices, soon rising among the ranks of his best Tonal Architects." Uupse seems a little bored by the story, although she can hardly have repeated it for that many inquisitive strangers. "I could not match his genius, but what Kagrenac could conceive, my craftsmen and I could build. He was a man of radical ideas. Many had their doubts and suspicions, as did I, but his power and vision were intoxicating. It was only when his project led to a war between Indoril Nerevar and my King Dumac that I left him."

"I do not know this story, of Kagrenac and Dumac. My apologies for the interruption." Bagarn seems fatigued by the effort of his short speech, and closes his eyes once more.

"Lord Fyr has tried many treatments over the years, and Bagarn is his greatest success, pulled as he was out of the dementia. Yet father has only succeeded in making his life fit for craftsmanship and conversation." Uupse begins to beat the drum with a practiced hand, rattling the caverns with palpitating echoes. "The last living dwarf enjoys only periods of lucidity, rather less than the waking hours of a mortal. We study down here, he and I. You may have heard that while corpus devours the victim, it also precludes all other diseases known the mortals. We have always hoped that our research might allow us to isolate the beneficial aspects of corpus, but have never met with much success."

"Has he gone to sleep now?"

"Or something like it," Uupse replies. "He may not be long, or it may last hours. Will you

return to the tower?"

"If it isn't any trouble, I think I'll wait to see if he rouses himself."

"Then I will tell you of the true origin of the First Council war, and the friendship that was broken. It is well worth knowing, if a little dull in the telling."

"Please do."

Uupse pulls a wet rage from a basket and begins washing the folds and creases of Bagarn's flesh, as if it were no different from scrubbing a tavern tabletop.

"Even as Nerevar united the Chimer and drove out the Nords, he made a peace with the respected Dwemer king, Dumac Dwarf-Orc."

"Quite a moniker on that one."

"Hmmn. Their trust and affection kept the dwarves in their citadels and the warlike Chimeri tribes from their weapons, and the First Council actually included a so-called House Dwemer. So close were the kings that they went in dual embassy to the new domain of Queen Alessia in Cyrod. The famed Moon-and-Star ring was specially crafted by Dumac's artisans, something that no ashlander would ever dare admit. But it was not to last."

Bagarn stirs suddenly, and Uupse leaves off bathing him. He follows her words, ears pricking for the familiar names in patient semi-conscious apprehension. He lived this story.

"And who was Kagrenac? And the Tonal Architects?"

"The former was the highest of the latter. A Priest of sorts, such as the Dwemer had them. Tonal Architects would plumb deeper mysteries than even the usual Dwemer subversion and modification of the Earthbones. They deal with the magic of the divine tones, as reflected by the sounding board of Lorkhan's Heart, which they discovered in the depths of their city inside Red Mountain. They could tame the mountain's moods with their enchantments, but Kagrenac went further, embarking on more ambitious and dangerous endeavors."

Bagarn nods in agreement, reading her tone.

"The war began when Voryn Dagoth discovered Kagrenac's harnessing of the Heart, and its use in the great brass walking god he was building. Voryn was the most pious of the Chimer in Nerevar's service, and came to him with the news. Lord Indoril was distraught, for neither could he abide such blasphemy against the scared Scarab. Nerevar confronted Dumac, who knew nothing of the project, for Kagrenac had kept it from him. When Nerevar saw Dumac's refusal to divulge the secret of the walker, the Anumidium, it came to blows, and the First Council broke in war."

Suddenly Bagarn speaks, a single word of foreign inflection, with the syllables strangely split apart.

"Ta-los!"

"What?"

"Yagrum Bagarn reminds us that Vivec gave Kagrenac's project to your Talos as the price of the Armistice. He conquered the rest of Tamriel with it, and Bagarn calls it 'a profanity for which the world paid twice and is still paying.'"

"Numidium!"

"Yes."

"So then there was the war, and the Nords came back, and I think I know that part of the story. But how did House Dagoth end up on the Dwemer side?"

Uupse frowns.

"They did not. Voryn was one of Nerevar's most trusted generals. The lie of his treason came later, long after the battle of which I do not think it is possible to speak with any certainty. Let my friend continue his own account."

Well that's a new one. Suddenly the Sharmat's words ring truer. The Dwemer survivor speaks, stronger and faster now.

"The war left me bitter, and when the Chimer reached the ground beneath our mountain, I

departed Kagrenac's service in disgust. He was not one to tolerate desertion, so I was in an Outer Realm during the climax of it all, when the battle ended.”

A pity he can't fill in any of that gaping hole in history.

“When I returned, I found only ashes. The mountain had erupted, shattering the landscape, and my people had vanished entirely, in a manner too complete and immediate to make their slaughter or expulsion possible, even at the hands of the savage Chimer. I wandered for a long time, searching Tamriel for any trace of my kin. I came even unto the island of Clan Rourken, who had refused Dumac's peace and hurled their great hammer Volendrung over the western horizon, settling where it landed. In the end, I returned to Red Mountain, which we had named Vvardenfell, and found only *corprus*, the curse of the sleeping god the Tribunal's recklessness had shed. My gracious host found me then, and I became the first of his many patients. His treatments restored my sentience, and while my memory often deserts me, we have shared conversation and company over the long centuries since then.”

It takes some nerve to respond to such a tale. But I am running out of time as only the dying can.

“And you have no idea what happened to your people?”

“I have my theories, all without the benefit of firsthand evidence, of course. Kagrenac sought to rewrite the laws of subcreation and the Dwemer place in it, seeking a restoration of the divinity whose loss all elves rue. His creation Anumidium may have succeeded with the side effect of wholesale displacement to some other plane, or he may have erred, and totally destroyed my race.”

“But Azura did not destroy them? Nor the Tribunal?”

“Do not credit such childish stories. I sense that you do not have long to talk, or else I would enjoy cultivating you as a partner in conversation. Lord Fyr is a stimulating companion, and Uupse is ever a comfort, but I so seldom have learned visitors.”

“I think I begin to understand your story. But if Numidium was the object of Kagrenac's plan, and the Numidium outlived him, to be used by Talos and then be destroyed...”

Without translation, he interrupts me, pronouncing a short phrase. Uupse shoots him a look.

“Yagrum Bagarn says to you, Naleva, an old Dwemer proverb. 'A Dwemer of eight can build a golem, but eight of Dwemer can become one.' You should go now, and leave him to rest.”

Rest indeed! The bastard is *grinning* at me as I depart, the boots heavy in my hands.

“My thanks, Naleva Polefel. Bagarn's displeasure is entirely too much in relation to such a fine artifact.” Fyr sets the boots upon a shelf. “Your own contribution is also quite interesting. But I have been preparing your trial, and have had no time to examine it properly.”

“Trial?”

He walks out of the office on spry legs and floats up another floor, beckoning me to ascend after him.

“The potion I promised is merely a trial of my newest *corprus* serum. I won't say it's a cure. That's not possible. But the substance is the last of a very long line of treatments.” Fyr steps out onto the next landing. “All the others have had the same result, I'm afraid.”

We enter a pod room near the tower's roof, filled with vine cages that once held troublesome slaves. They still contain four drowsy figures. On the right, an ashlander with fingers turning into claws, then an old Dunmer woman, almost bald, and a Breton.

“Here are your fellow patients. I was about to run the trial when you arrived. The pale fellow at left is my control. Newly-infected, with no treatment whatsoever. Paradoxically, my tonics respond least to the immature forms of *corprus*. So I would not hold out too much hope on your own account. Anyway, now the experiment has two controls, and is running behind schedule.”

Fyr produces a tin flask and motions towards a narrow shelf with a number of shot glasses on it. He's rushing me, I realize, pushing me towards death as if it were a sip of sujamma. Those others, they're resigned, but I'm not. I am lucid and I am armed, not helpless before the long dark. Now? Right now? I begin to struggle, but only mentally.

I could tell Fyr all the best jokes from the Nibennium waterfront. I could watch the sun set over Azura's Coast from the roof. I could show Beyte the time of her life; I could leap from the tower; I could sit here just a little while longer and think of home...

Most realistically, I could go down below and speak of Red Mountain with Yagrum Bagarn, amass untold knowledge that would be in some way eternal. And for what? I don't know if that mage was compelling me to it, and never did ask. But he didn't put me in a cage, only sat me down on the floor and poured me a glass with tender fingers. As the warm, tasteless liquid splashed on my tongue, one thought came to me.

The curse of flesh before her flies.

I dreamed of carrion. A sea of it, sloshing around the confines of a tower that tilted with every gust of wind. The stench of it buffeted me; it stuck to my face. There was death on my tongue, but the taste was wrong. Too much salt. When the hand clamped around my wrist, I knew that I had not dreamed but had been spared from the dreams, waking into the world instead, a calm world free of music.

Finding yourself face-down in a puddle of your own vomit can be a joyous experience in a highly limited number of situations. I have been in one, and if there is another, I have found no evidence of it. The spongy floor of Tel Fyr beneath my right palm, filth-covered hair plastered to my eyelids. I raised my head out of the puddle, and left behind a white layer of stuck skin.

"You look like a cooked crab," Uupse says. It is the hollow voice of someone who has been poleaxed by something, and simply blurts out the first thing to come to mind. How comforting that we are in the same situation, patient and nurse. A great deal has yet to come to me, although the doubts of my own consciousness are fading fast.

Spit out bloody mucus. It is death I taste after all, robbed of its sweetness. Soon I'll find that my tongue has become necrosed where Fyr's draught first touched it. Sweetness is not something I will taste ever again, or if so only faintly.

The next few minutes go on much like that, with Uupse helping me to my feet and the miracle of two living voices drawing other members of the Fyr household in a rush. A few more realizations come late. The awful stench in the room is due mostly to the ashlander, whose flesh has split open in great gashes. His female neighbor has undergone accelerated decay, and the Breton is just cold and quiet. Second, the flesh that grew back on my chest, healing the spell wounds so quickly, has now sloughed off, filling my shirt with dead tissue. There is healthy new skin underneath, but the collateral damage includes my right nipple. I think I'll miss that most of all.

"Bring her down." Divayth's voice bubbles up out of nowhere, transmitted through the walls at a genteel volume.

"Can you walk?" For the second time, Uupse touches my sleeve unnecessarily, clearly struggling with a repression of undignified glee.

"Aye." I either feel *fantastic*, or just infinitesimally better than yesterday. If it was yesterday. "How long?"

"Not long." She scoops me up in a cocoon of Alteration and pulls me through the flywell like the leashed hummingbird of a highborn Nibenese brat.

"Breton's dead too, right?"

"Very." What heedless good humor she pronounces this with!

Fyr is wearing a cassock instead of armor when we enter. He appraises me with eyes half-closed, but it is not a squint. Actually, I couldn't begin to name the expression on his face.

"Extraordinary." Or at least, that's probably what he says, having slipped back into his native tongue. We are face to face in his chambers now, with quite an audience at the entrance. Divayth steps forward, motioning with his hands as if drawing down a large hood. A hundred tiny noises of the tower and the world beyond it suddenly cease. Dust motes float trapped in place around my head, frozen. I realize that a few seconds ago, I could hear the garments of each of Fyr's daughters rustling, and now there is nothing. It all stems from something—maybe a belt—he is wearing beneath that robe.

"This is a sort of diagnostic sphere, Naleva. It allows me make inquiries of a mystic nature without interference." He slips a ring on my finger (I cannot tell even the school of the enchantment) and removes it after several seconds, then has me down four more shot glasses of progressively distasteful liquid. "This is all just post-trial routine, making sure you aren't about to crash. You will of course allow me to observe you for several days, and learn all I can from this remarkable development."

"I wouldn't count on it. Although you and your daughters have been most hospitable, I have urgent business in Balmora." I pull away from the last of the proffered draughts to steal a glance at the door. Beyte looks especially good to me right now. 'Ferocious appetites and passions indeed.' Fyr takes note.

"Not bad for something born in a jar, eh? Not daughters, really. A little project, a side benefit of my research into corpus. Made them myself, from my own flesh. Quite a comfort to me in my old age." What an old cackling lecher! I suppose he doesn't mind me going that much.

"Please do not take my departure for lack of gratitude... I am cured, aren't I?" I'm awake, aren't I?

"No, not cured. As I said, you still bear corpus. But the symptoms appear to be gone. What symptoms, exactly, I shall have to ascertain. But I think I can do that from afar, in time." What does that mean? "At the very least, your disease is no longer communicable."

Then pick a daughter, damnit. Sound returns to the room, and our clothes seem to settle.

"Divayth Fyr, you've given me..." The first faltering yet. I may have left some details out, concerning my level of composure at this time. Surprise, reader, sometimes even my memory has to paraphrase. I never was able to record a passable account of my mental state at some distant point in the past. But you didn't sign on to read that sort of drama anyhow.

"That's quite alright, and do not worry, for were I to keep you for observation, you likely wouldn't escape my curious clutches for years. In truth I am almost anxious to be rid of you, to re-run my trial serum and seize this miraculous tail-end. I must have more test subjects, to reproduce your unprecedented response—"

"Lord Fyr." Hell, that came out aggressive even to my ears. I have drawn myself up, cutting the best figure I can in the vomit-stained sackcloth. "Your tonic has succeeded on the strength of your art, but also by the dictates of prophecy. I am Indoril Nerevar reborn, and the Curse-of-Flesh is my trial to overcome." For a moment I think that Fyr has restored his sphere of silence, because right now I could hear a guar shit in Suran. "I do not believe that your tonic will bring other patients anything but death. And please, for my sake, do not risk Yagrum Bagarn's life on this false lead."

His face has gone blank again, enigmatic of millennia. Then a sudden upticking at the corners of his mouth.

"Never fear, Naleva Polefel. Bagarn always was too valuable to put in jeopardy. In any case, I do not think that long-time patients can be helped in any permanent way."

"Really, I would rather that no one else die split open in a room like those three upstairs."

"That, I can't promise. But I will wait and consider the implications of this, including the likelihood of your claim. Your astonishing revival could make a man believe anything, yet from a purely scientific view, corpus victims have all sorts of delusions."

He doesn't mean that as an insult, it's plain. This old fellow has just seen an awful lot of False Incarnates in his time.

"I would value your input in that regard, Lord Fyr. Ever seen any of the prophecies get this far?"

He shakes his head, but it isn't an answer either way.

"My opinion really has nothing to do with the matter. Neither does the logic that produces it. Go in peace, Naleva, and fear at least one thing less in this world."

I dunno, boss, it was momentary deficit of fear that got me into this mess. And look what it's gone and gotten me to say. 'I am Nerevar.' Old Clavicus must be laughing somewhere at the bet he's won.

The reclusive daughter Delte Fyr has a Recall point in Sadrith Mora, so my exit from Tel Fyr is scarcely less confused than my entrance. The Telvanni are admirably heedless of Temple law and morality, but their seat of Vvardenfell nurtures some bureaucratic wranglings of its own. I materialize at the ship and strider port according to regulations, on the wrong side of the Gateway Inn and the Hospitality papers I have no way of paying for. Now *this* is Dunmer hostility as it was meant to be. Why sneer at a visitor when you can lock them out entirely? Nevermind that a Legion fortress and two chartered guildhalls lie within the sacrosanct fungal perimeter. Hermy alone knows how that works out. Wolverine Hall has the guide portal, I know, and it's my only way of getting home if I don't want to sell my spear or sign on to some lugger as unable seaman. After hanging around the inn for a while trying to shmooze twenty drakes, a Telvanni Bosmer clues me in that Wolverine Hall has a pier in back. So I catch a ride on a skiff loaded with dairy goods, never getting a good look at mushroom town and its central tower that so dwarfs Tel Fyr.

This Imperial limpet on the island has the same dingy, misplaced look as most Vvardenfell forts, consisting of twisting stairwells (how convenient such things are!) and muddy practice yards. The mages here are almost comically cramped, stuffed into a single stone chamber with their quarters off on another floor entirely. Maybe that's what makes them so prickly, but it's not as if the Balmora robes are much better. Apparently the guide portals are reserved for Guild members of a certain rank (and wealth), making my passage here entirely a matter of Blades influence. My attempts to persuade the wilting goldenrod that the Balmora chapter owed me several thousand gold almost broke through into verbal assault, but at last she realized the advantage in letting me through and so considerably reduced the Guild's debt.

Once in Balmora, Ranis Athrys tries to dock the first payment for my staff by the amount pledged for transport from Sadrith Mora. Vicious little cunt. The joke's on the robes, though, because the mushroom mages demanded an IOU in writing, and the word choice puts the law on my side. The town I thought I'd never see again is quite comely today, but that might have something to do with the ponderously heavy purse bouncing at my side. Time to go shock Caius out of his sugar.

He must be have indulged in a few mournful smokes, because no one has bothered to re-set the door yet. And now that I'm close, I think that handcart parked in the alley is actually attached to his place. Yes, I recognize the footlocker, my footlocker. At least it was empty when I left.

"Hello?" Someone did point an arrow at me the last time I barged in, so I call ahead. This entrance is less harrowing, but similar to the last in one unwelcome aspect. The cottage is empty except for Nine-Toes, who squats in the corner, burning papers. Everything else has been stripped away, except for the bed frame and furniture.

"So. You are not deathly sick after all." A brief glance, that's all I get from him. So far only Uupse has show the proper degree of shock at my recovery, and the lack of recognition deadens my own reaction.

"No longer, anyways."

"I knew there could be no such thing as an incurable disease. Leave it you fleshies to soil yourselves over a backwater desert skin condition."

Being Argonian must afford some unusual perspectives on illness.

"Where is Caius?"

"Gone."

Pages blacken and curl.

"Gone?" You scaly little puke.

"Recalled to Cyrodiil. Left no orders for the dead girl, either."

Does this rattle me? A weight has dropped in my throat, a numbing sensation, but is it just surprise?

"How can—who heads the Blades now?"

"You... do not need to know that," he replies in a voice that makes me suspect no one inherited the post.

"Damn it, at least tell me why he was recalled."

"Internal politics. Some concern about his sugar." Nine-Toes seems suddenly more cooperative, as if this information falls under the category of gossip. "He was not happy about leaving, but his family lives in the capital. And there is the matter of the Emperor's health, and the factions behind the succession rumors."

"Will he back?"

"If he has his way. He may not, and will need a new house if he does."

"What's happening to this one?"

"Rithleen says you have made it too visible."

"Who's Rithleen?"

"Nevermind that."

"So I could take the house."

Nine-Toes feeds the last of the documents to the flaring fire, exasperated at the volley of questions.

"I would not think it wise." A scathing look. "But when did you ever accept his discipline?"

A shrug and a stare serve to answer him. Whatever Nine-Toes' exact function may be, he is Blades agent enough to comprehend my unspoken eviction. *If you have nothing else to burn, get out of my house.* He leaves me alone, probably as glad of the parting as I am.

So. To proceed without Caius. Proceed in what?

I slump into a chair and rest my feet on the bedpost. Without even bracing myself, I could flip the heavy wooden construction on end with the pressure of my toes alone. I am strong now, borrowed sinews of the Sharmat. No one will ever hurt me again. Not if I return to Cyrodiil. I have the money now, enough to live on for a long time, and increasing every week.

But Red Mountain's corpus doesn't belong in Nibennium, and I am the sickness now. Bringing it home is out of the question, after Tel Fyr (What was it Fyr's daughter said about immunity to other diseases?) and especially after the music and bells of Ilunibi. I saw that, and it will not brook desertion. The sweet-smelling divine rot in the Dunmeri soul and its crucible beneath Vvardenfell is no concern of a deported CiCi, but now Naleva Polefel has business with the First Council War and that moment when all the players converged, shattering history and projecting their conflict out to the future in a plume of divine dust. There are too many grievances, of man and elf and daedra, multiplying upon each other and catching up too many lives. I will end this war myself if I have to.

Which means to proceed without Caius, but not in his mission, nor the Emperor's (right?). Cosades the skeptic believed in his assignment grudgingly. Only now have I bowed to the evidence, but it is with considerably more willingness. Maybe we follow the same orders after all, but where the Empire thought to bring down the Tribunal (a reckless move if so) or otherwise break the chafing stalemate of the Armistice, I seek only repatriation. What's more, these prophecies smell something like purpose.

That's a shorthand for whatever evolution I went through during that time period of post-Urshilaku skepticism and post-corpus realization. There was rather more thrashing and casting

about than that, and a period of bewildered inaction, but no one wants to read about such things. Suffice to say, that memory of mine thought back to the meeting with Nibani Maesa (which really didn't come through on these pages) and on her guesses as to the whereabouts of the Seven Curses and the lost prophecies. She supposed that the Temple hides them, and who is the only member of the Temple who would be able to share knowledge about such things without cursing my heresy? Sorry, copperhead, but it's time to put you at risk again...

When I say it was time, I mean that in a loose, narrative sense. Before seeking Mehra Milo I hung around Balmora for a while, waiting for Chuna to come back. His bastardly hardly sojourn was rapidly becoming overdo; his absence and Caius' left me knowing almost no one in town except for Nine-Toes. Oh, and Antabolis. I visited him once or twice, in-between refurbishing the bread-and-basket to a habitable state. Our conversations were somewhat restrained, as I could not trust the truth (dangerous religiously and politically) of my quest to the Tong-ified atmosphere of the Fighters Guild. I owed him my thanks, however, for the gift of the puzzle box in my hour of need (he says he was able to configure a key based on its specifications, and wants me to return to explore a deeper part of Arky). More than that, it was touching of him to see me off at the Mages. I realize that these are the pitiful orphan's standards of affection, but Vvardenfell is full of friends for no one. As it turns out, Antabolis does not partake in the corruption of the guild (except to indulge the occasional weakness for Dwemeri baubles), and was able to fill me in on Orvas Dren, who wields equal power on the Hlaalu Council and over the island's Tong. Antabolis 'would not be surprised' to hear that his viciously regressive politics lead him to support the Sixth House. Antabolis' stolidly numerical mind, however, thought little of my reports of statuette dreams sendings, and went back to mulling the medical factors behind my survival of corpus.

And then it was off to High Fane. I timed the strider poorly, and ended up on a gondola around evening, which means I'll have to awkwardly seek out the librarian in her quarters. Vivec is somewhat subdued tonight. It's not the hour but the weather, Red Mountain having deposited a minute film of ash that morning, as if to remind us all of its presence. Like an omen, it dries up the life around the city, or else maybe the native Dunmer can sense something more definite in the air. Honestly, the fugue that so depresses the gondolier is fine by me. Time and distance behave oddly in the cavernous spaces between cantons, making travel a grating, restless experience, and the lack of crowding on tonight's inky waterways alleviate the feeling.

The pilgrims all go away after nightfall, leaving me along on the High Fane dock, with an expansive orange glow clinging to the horizon over Ebonheart. And then, because not all of this island's unspeakable oddities can be properly introduced or conveyed, not even giving the gondola time to draw away, the dreugh appeared. I knew what it was because of its Nibenese cousins, and tried to record the progression of shock and understanding that befell me, but it didn't come out legible. So there was just a young dreugh treading water with lazy, effortless flicks of its back, looking up at me through the gaps in the dock as if this were the normal means of communication between mortals. The lagoon was calm that night, and he was able to stick his mouth just above the water with a practiced air.

"Greetings, Naleva." Gods above, he speaks to me, every bit as naturally as Yagrum Bagarn (a fellow mer) could not. And yet, dreugh have the faces of elves, no more distorted than a Dunmeri mask, despite the crablike monstrosity of the rest of them.

Here I answered as any other flabbergasted s'wit would have.

"I am the messenger of Divayth Fyr." His accent isn't in his command of the language, it's in his physiology. His *mouth* has an accent.

"Oh... Fyr sent you? ...What is your name?"

"In his service, such things are not necessary. Fyr has three question for you."

I look at the surroundings of this ludicrous scene. Nothing but a damp dock and the behemoth of the temple canton overhead, the lights of Vivec to the north. I crouch and pretend to be fiddling with my shoe.

“Shoot.”

“This means yes? Fyr wants to know, have you had the bloody flux in these past days. I can list the symptoms if you so require.”

“What? No, of course not. Why would he ask?”

“What of high fever? And palpitations with aching limbs? Any illness at all?”

“No, none of that. Perfect health, really. Now what the hell does he mean by asking?”

The dreugh's eyes ply the gap of air between us, trying to focus.

“Fyr infected you with three diseases the day you parted. One of the West, one of the East, and one of the Blight.”

“Talos' tits! What ever for?”

“May I see your right... pointer finger? Just hold it over the water.”

The suspicion arrived all at once then, but I did it anyways. Fyr's maritime messenger eyed my proffered appendage uncertainly.

“He apologizes for the liberties taken. Do... have all these digits remained the same in days past?”

“Obviously. This hand even healed over that time.”

“You may remove it, Naleva.”

A pause.

“You are going to explain this too, or I'll spear you like a fish.”

“Fyr explains that you wore a ring, briefly. It bore a curse that magically ages that hand that wears it. Your hand is unchanged, or so you tell me.”

“You may be sure of it.”

“Then your corpus renders you immune to all known diseases, while your flesh shall never wither beneath time's swell. Neither Blight nor age can harm you.”

And so, not quite that long after arriving on Vvardenfell, I had the dreugh messenger boy of an ancient Telvanni wizard paraphrasing prophecy at me, in the shadow of Vivec's frozen moon-god. Oh, he also says I'll live forever.

“The hell you say!”

“That is his message. I now return to my companion at Tel Fyr, and the journey is long.”

“Wait!”

He did not wait, and I sat down hard on the planks. The answer still eludes me, so I'll pose the question here. Just how in the hell are you supposed to react when someone up and tells you about your immortality? Sure, there's drums in your head, and an overwhelming onrush of something like dismay, though you know that in a certain cold, calculating sense the news is fantastically good. But as a matter of fact, no one ever gave you the choice, and it's a lot to throw at a person, no more fair than tossing a crown onto someone's head. Kingship can be nice, but it's *me* you're tinkering with here!

I have no memory of my parents. My mother only lived long enough to suckle me, I'm told, imparting that barest proof of love. But the point is, I never was one of those bereaved sort of orphans, cursing the world that so monstrously demands we must die. Rather, I've always thought of myself as being in harmony with the idea of mortality. If you asked me about the prospect of living forever, on some lazy afternoon when it was too hot to move, I'd have said that I wouldn't want to outlast my friends, that life should only go on so long, ending before it becomes stale. And yet here I am, staring the Fifth Era full in the face. I'll never grow old with anyone (not that I planned on hanging around while some broad got dried up and jittery anyhow), I'll never command the respect of an elder. Nor provoke the pity and contempt for one either, though, and if I somehow arrive at wisdom, it will be apparently before my time. A three-century-old half-breed with a seventy-year-old sage's smile; it

could work. I can still be killed, of course. Perhaps that's the rub, becoming too attached to my life to take the slightest risk and living in fear. Or the reverse, craving an end to it but lacking the nerve to see it done. All I really know, is that life is no longer short. No need to feel remorse for the chances I didn't take, skirts I didn't chase. All can be accomplished in time. Hell, I'd better get on this Nerevarine thing just to avoid panicking before the unspeakable immensity of the time that lies before me. And if the Sharmat puts a bell-hammer through my head, it will have been a normal heroic life.

Thanks the Divines, thank the Ancestors, thank Azura, even thank the Three for their repression, because it pushed the accursed questions from my mind in the nick of time. Awful hard to think about life when you're living it, or so goes the tavern wisdom, and logical, intuitive type that I am, conundrums tend to diminish and resolve themselves if I leave them be for a while. What I mean is that not ten minutes after that gut-punch, I was walking through the halls of High Fane as they echoed with vespers. Mehra's room was easier to find than I feared, meaning that only a half dozen of Berel Sala's Ordinators cast exquisitely dark glances at me through their masks, ruing Lord Vivec's policy of open doors to all.

No one answered at my knock, but the hallway was empty and the door unlocked, so I went in. Better to leave a note and arrange a more obscure meeting place. She's likely to refuse my visit if I put her in too much danger by barging in. The bedside table has some paper on it, so all I need is a quill. And that's when I decide to snoop. This bit of reused paper is folded upon itself, with the upward face bearing the word *Amaya*. Isn't that familiar? Sure, it's a lake in Ascadia, but that isn't...

Amaya. A nice sort of name, recalling flowers and spring. Amaya is me. She said so. I pounce on the letter.

Sorry I missed you. I had to run some documents over to the Inquisitor at the Ministry and am likely to be tied up there for a while. If you don't want to wait, you can come meet me and we'll leave together. And remember to return those Intervention scrolls you borrowed. If you ended up using them, the Mages can sell you two more. You said you would get here at dawn, so Alvela Saram will be on duty. Just ask after me and she will let you in.

Oh, but this is plain, very plain. How desperate must she have been to resort to it? And yet the handwriting is immaculate. A little careless, but equally carefree. There's a potion under the bed, marked with the daedric sigil for levitation. How could she have known to expect me? Maybe Caius arranged to send me back immediately after Ilunibi. We do think alike, in some ways.

A pounding sensation in my gut, slightly buoyant. It's the feeling of decision, which comes across me very occasionally. Like when the Prince of Plots draws up your number (to put it in Dunmeri terms), wholeheartedly in agreement with your own inclinations. For a moment the revelation of my immortality melds into invincibility in my mind, and the careful, criminal sort of planning that would best serve this endeavor does not occur. The Temple is going to know me sooner or later, so let it be on my own announcement. I'm coming, Copperhead.

What doubts I have surface the next morning, on the way back down from the Foreign Quarter plaza with scrolls in hand (For a girl of simple tastes, I always set out flush and come back broke). My due diligence manifests as a sudden urge to find Huleeya, and ask for advice. I catch Jobasha locking up, but not even a khajiit as useful as he can know the whereabouts of the Morag Tong all the time. It seems that the two of us would get along quite well, but talking to cats like Jobasha can be hard. Maybe some political credentials would be in order. 'Hey,' I'll casually remark, 'I'm off to bust open the Inquisition and free some prisoners of conscience. Ya got an books on that?' Actually, that's a good question. Suppose that other heretics get their hopes up, only to see us fixing to step out to Ebonheart in a twinkling...

And are the Imperials likely to cooperate with Temple authorities in their own jurisdiction?

It all amounts to the guiltiest gondola ride of my life, and me walking into the deepening shadow of Baar Dau casting nervous glances at the guards. I suppose the Ministry is full of Ordinators. Mehra later remarked on the irony of my breaking into their prison (the hollowed-out rock having been

a vicious offspring of Vivec and Molag Bal, according to dogma). Their armored masks bear the likeness, after all, of the greatest Indoril who ever lived, Saint Nerevar. I drank the potion to reach the moon's lowest scaffolding, partly for the practice and mostly because you never know when I'll have to fly to Masser on this broomstick.

I've never levitated in open air like this, and the prospect of the drought expiring unexpectedly is terrifying. Without the constant presence and reinforcement of the blade, I can only estimate the duration, and who know whether pushing against the northerly force of the breeze shortens my time aloft? High Fane looks small and somewhat provincial from above, but I'm not half as high as St. Olms when I step out onto the timber platform of the Ministry. Somehow, no one challenges me. Perhaps I look like a pilgrim, lacking proper fear before Sala's goons, but not quite a subversive. Anyway, unlike bound enchantments, potion spells can't be canceled at will, so I end up pulling myself along the rope supports, unable to walk when my feet won't stay down. The scaffolding winds up the Ministry's side, until another door faces southwest, away from most of the prying eyes below. This helmetless Ordinator standing guard had better be my woman.

"Alvela Saram?"

"Who goes there?"

"I... Amaya. You know me?"

"It has been days, Amaya. I could not hold this post much longer. But I know you. Some of us have friends that are also your friends." She turns slowly, unlocking the door piece by piece.

"Glad we understand each other. What am I facing in there?"

"The Hall of Processing, and the guarded corridors after that. There is only one cell block, but you will need keys, probably from the Inquisitor's office on your immediate right. He may be down below, but he may also be upstairs."

"Would that be a problem?" Hell, but that door has a lot of latches.

"If you are not fireproof." Her fingers pause on the handle while she flays me with a look. "Do not kill any Ordinators, or you will break our trust."

"Fair enough. Where do I find Mehra?"

"Do not speak the names of your friends. Her cell is farthest east, on the bottom tier."

"Almsivi protects," I say, anxious to go. Saram turns from ducking her head into the empty hallway, and yeah, that valediction fell flat. I recognized the spiteful irony of it by the time the words left my lips (and embraced it), but I think some other state of mind conceived them. This is an Ordinator committing treason against god, after all, for some unknown ideal of a more just and honest divine despotism. I suppose I felt myself taking advantage, what with my heedlessly destructive intent on iconoclasm and all. Wanted to make my fifth column here feel like she was aiding and abetting a similarly civic-minded servant of the Three.

"And you may enter." An irritated whisper now. The inside of this place is as featureless as any mineshaft, naught but a rounded ceiling and four doors facing each other. I step into the guts of Baar Dau.

"Bolt the door when I go, Amaya. Quietly."

"When you go?"

Saram blows on her fingers as an answer, a flicker of Alteration pricking at my nostrils. Then she casts a lingering glance at the palace and steps off the platform in a hurried, fluid motion. Those arcing pauldrons make a slight whistling sound, but otherwise her and her golden plate hurtle downward like so much lead. And that finger-wagging charm of hers? It wasn't levitation. She hits the water with a crack, opening a veined starburst of foam. No slowfall either. Here's hoping for waterbreathing. That would be the best way to feign incapacitation without sounding the alarm at once.

So, I need the keys from the Inquisitor's office, do I? Do let that be the only security measure I need to defeat. With god and gravity solidly on their side, surely the guardians of the Ministry can afford to be lax. The door on the right, just inside the entrance hall. Chamber? Grotto? I'm not clear on

the nomenclature. After all, this place floats by the will of Vivec, and the faith that gives the gods their power (yes, I've read Karkuxor and lived a life to verify him, so take your aedric piety and eat it), so it's a meteor (or a god itself, or an unwanted child, or a ball of shit?), and these are caves? Manmade tunnels? If pilgrims on High Fane saw Saram drop, would their cries for rescue reach me here? She would have to report an intrusion on the Ministry then. These are not the careful, directed thoughts that are conducive to a successful heist. And yet how can I help wandering, in this dizzy aerial excavation, so otherworldly for all the banality of its appearance?

An unlocked door, and the office. Desk, cabinets, benches, a guar skin screen, wicker baskets and a rug, all in the warm glow of lanterns. Oh, and the Grand Inquisitor, back from correcting the wayward downstairs. *Damnit*, Alvella Saram. He has the same old Ordinator armor, but with a short cape of night-blue, wrapped up and tucked behind shoulders like a shawl. The towering ridgeline of hair he's got appears unseemly in a man of his office, the ashlander-esque affectation of a low level enforcer on the head of the faith's protector, overseer of awesome arguments and eldritch tortures. I shut the door on him.

"Who..." Sure it's the terrible voice one would expect, but I have just put some quiet confusion in it, and my trepidation flows away. Like Saram, plummeting out of sight. Take the spear in hand, fee; the green slackness beneath your palm, the encapsulated debility, absolute control in your control. If killing no longer bothers me consistently, the feeling I get from using this enchantment does. The Inquisitor whips open the door and gets the haft in the face. Down like a drunken guar. Maybe ten seconds I've got, maybe twenty. Magic is always tricky with pureblood elves that have some years under their belt. I sit him down against the wall and stride towards the desk like I know what I'm doing. Even those with the surety of faith and the arrogance of lifelong command (especially that, actually), aren't equipped for experiences like this, and his eyes widen at my approach, flickering momentarily towards a small drawer. It's locked, but I am not the ten stone maiden I once was, and rip it out by the roots, jolting broken fragments of metal latch onto the thick carpet. There isn't much in the drawer, just a copy of Vivec's Sermons (don't ask), a prayer scarf, a nix claw wand (somehow I discerned its nature by sight alone), and the heavy key, wrapped up in velvet cord. I pocket it and the wan, turning back towards my victim. He has taken these past moments to compose himself, and that face bespeaks serene authority again, the eyes telling me things I don't want to dwell on. What's more, I think his toes are wiggling in those boots. Well, let his poise serve him well through *this*.

My new strength has never phased me yet, but the ease with which I heft his holiness, armor and all, is unnerving. Kicking open the door, I head back towards the landing, feeding him paralysis through my fingers. The staff was made for timed discharges through contact with wood, but this is a more efficient and versatile method. I suppose I invented it on the spot. Stepping back out in the open air, the sea breeze greets my cheeks. It smells like mountains, and other oceans that do not dwell under the shadow of this looming awful moon. Two, three deep breaths of pleasure with the silent Inquisitor cradled in my arms. Alvella Saram clings to the underside of the High Fane wharf far below, looking up at the Ministry.

My captive begins to swarm in my arms, like a cat held too long. There is the intake of breath, prelude to a killing spell. I drop him over the platform's edge, and am back inside before he impacts the water. Saram said not to kill Ordinators, but any Inquisitor worth his salt should know a spell to recover from that, and if my accomplice cares so damn much, she can rescue him herself. Someone in the lefthand room seems to have heard the proceedings, and the western door opens outward. Whoever it was then gets catapulted back into their office as I kick the door shut, draw my knife and sink it up to the hilt in the frame, obstructing the latch. That might take a few minutes to break down, and for a moment, Corpus is glorious.

"Desecration! Desecration!"

Let her bleat all she wants. Sound doesn't really carry in here. Out of the foyer and into a circular tunnel. Saram let me in near the bottom of this hollowed-out sphere, so we'll head uphill.

Moving with a lightness that comes only from speed, the staff drops another golden mask from behind. The Ordinator slides and rolls down the sloping passageway, making an unspeakable din. Running metal feet can be heard now, bouncing in from odd directions. The hall reaches a heavy portal and loops earthward again. This ought to be it.

Key in the lock, and from behind comes the first true challenge, in recognition of what I am. Bal take these Dunmer craftsmen and their inability to make a lock that turns the same way as the rest of Tamriel! With a nimbleness worthy of Todwendy on a good day, I parry a sword thrust in my peripheral vision and worm sideways through the half-open door. Slam it shut, hand on the knob, lean forwards and Tosh above, look at this little slice of Oblivion! I swear this place can't fit in the rather diminutive body of the Ministry. The open space alone, reaching into clouded heights, must be larger than the rock itself. Really though, the fact should not even begin to surprise you. Baar Dau, everyone.

The feeble pushing and hammering on the door behind me begins to draw attention. Guards and Inquisitors from around the expansive chamber begin to turn and look, a lazy process. I stand at the head of a maze of wooden scaffolding and stairways, leading down to a pair of pillars and the clay wall of the prisoners' pen. Beyond that, rows and rows of terraced cells huddle one above the other, rising towards the distant ceiling to overhang the tangled walkways about me. Pulley-equipped buckets and lanterns dangle from the platforms of the upper upper caves, casting confused linear shadows in the dingy swamp of a prison. Baar Dau, everyone.

Pale-skinned ships mill about in the yard, most of them outlanders. The Empire gladly rolls over for the Temple when foreigners fall afoul of Morrowind's blasphemy laws. A consul's agent swoops in and instructs the foul-mouthed offender to admit fault in exchange for a short imprisonment or public shaming. (An admirable arrangement, really, allowing for a directed outlet of native hostility to the imperial presence, while those arrested can have their experiences published in Cyrodiil later on, flattering all our best ideals about religion and our benighted provinces.) It's the natives in the cells above who truly have cause to fear the Ordinators' investigative wing, and the unrepentant feel the full force of the openly acknowledged vindictiveness in the Tribunal's personality. In Vivec's city, a vicious rascal with silver tongue and unfathomable poetic mind looks on while his sister's agents do their work.

Not to misplace this exposition, but I have been effortlessly, almost absentmindedly holding the door shut behind me. Two watchmen in the mismatched garb of Temple auxiliaries become more suspicions of my presence with every approaching step. Another few feet, and they will decide that I am no interloping messenger from the city. Need to get behind that gate and in among the crowd of blasphemers.

“You! Weapon down!”

It is damn hard to hide a spear, you know. The lead guard was pounding up the nearest steps by the time I stepped away from the entrance. Three long strides brought me to the edge of the landing at a dead run, to vault on my staff across to a bare piling. I fired the levitation charm just as I pushed off, surging forward in a leap that rook me on a flat trajectory, thirty feet forward and over the heads of the astonished Ordinators. By the time the rushing air slowed my momentum I was past the barrier, and simply dropped into the crowded enclosure. None of the inmates about me knew quite what to do, but a suddenly unruly atmosphere is never without movement and trouble. The throng became inflexible and obstructive, despite its slack-jawed incomprehension, and I had to lay about with the end while the wardens fumbled with keys and clambered over the lattice gate.

Tripping over the legs of a sprawling Nord (who added a few weeks to his blasphemy sentence if anyone was listening), Mehra's cell drew near. Rightmost on the lowest tier, just a single door, staring at me like a lidded eye. A feed trough used for drinking water at my feet, I scooped it up and rammed the timbers into the latch at top speed. The lock crumbled, the trough recoiled from my stinging hands, and I slammed into the door myself, carried forward by the sudden stop. I do not remember if I fell down, or stumbled into the cell when the door shuddered inward; I just recall suddenly standing a few steps inside.

Three candles lit the spacious confines, and the rock walls had a yellowed, earthy hew. A mat lay in the center of the floor, with a clay tea set upon it. All in all, it resembled a place for contemplation, not imprisonment. But there in those candles was the dull shine of her hair. Mehra sat with her back turned and legs crossed, head downcast. The loose sackcloth robe she wore was undone, fallen down about her waist to expose the faint whip marks on her shoulders.

“Hey there, copperhead.”

I spun around to tend the door before our eyes could meet, trying to block the latch as I had upstairs. That done, I lunged for the two scroll cases in my pocket.

“Amaya.” How that name rippled on her lips. She was standing now, upright and dressed in an instant.

“Right you are. Get those out, fast.” I tossed her the scrolls and planted my shoulder into the doorframe as armor clattered outside. A glance back, to watch those particular eyes of hers dart along the runes and script of the parchment she held, until comprehension dawned and she vanished in a slowly swelling haze of brightness. I made for the last scroll, and acrid heat washed over me as the door exploded. Retreating to the rear of the chamber, flames lapped at the scroll's curling corner. Someone near the ruined entrance wound up for a throw, but the charm in my hands sang out to me. I did not even need to finish the second word before the flung axe evaporated in the air before me, and I was in Ebonheart.

The cramped courtyard of Castle Ebonheart's chapel is laid out with no thought given to the likelihood that distressed travelers could materialize there at any moment. The flagstones simply slithered upwards to meet our grounding feet in the exact center of the yard, passersby be damned (I have always thought of Intervention spells as something of a coup for the faith. Notwithstanding the existence of the Almsivi variant, it's a goof proof of the faith). My little lost librarian huddled in an ivy-clad corner, looking away out to sea with girlishly bare feet showing underneath her robe. I had to pause amidst the encompassing cold stone and watch her for a while. Had I made no noise on arrival.

As I had hoped for, she slowly turned to meet my gaze. I had the next few moments all planned out, when the situation intervened. The Emperor conch shell horn in the twin tower of High Fane blasted the lagoon with such a sound: the scathing ashstorm concealed in Vivec's laughing Ascadian soul. I leaned out over the railing to peer at the cantons, mirroring themselves in spiteful resplendence. A flash of copper, and Mehra Milo was at my side, one hand on the marble bannister and another at my belt, as if searching for a weapon.

“What have you done with us,” she asked. ‘Have you killed me,’ was the unspoken query, with the Ministry still in sight. It is said that the Ordinators' justice is ultimately merciful to the compliant, after all.

For a moment I thought her alarm pessimistic, but then the Tribunal unleashed its joyous enforcer. Somewhere the dome of Redoran Canton's plaza split open wide and spat three stories of venerable bull netch into the faded Vvardenfell sky. Even halfway across the harbor I recoiled from the ledge, and haven't looked at the gentle dumb beasts quite the same way again. Dyed in crimson and purple, the monstrosity carried the same sort of howdah tower as the silt striders of the elite, its lower shell bedecked with blinking war lanterns of various hues. For all the gentle, lazy movement of its buoyant tentacles, Temple vengeance closed with our thin veneer of Imperial jurisdiction at a terrifying speed.

“Have you told Blatta Hateria to make ready?” This in a flap of robe as Mehra hurries past into the castle's entry hall, leaving me alone on the balcony.

“Who?” Beaten-up librarians with soft feet don't run very fast, and I overtake my rescuee in the Colovian collonade where the Duke's figureheads and sycophants congregate.

"You mean I didn't mention her in the note? Drat, then tell me you have your own way out of the city!"

"Not as such... now where's the damn exit?" At that point I had never been in the Imperial seat before, and all those practical, defensible little arched doors looked the same.

"Then we'll have to hide for a time." The decisiveness in her tone surprises me even as the hope ebbs from it. "I think Hateria is a part-time smuggler, and never easy to find. The docks, maybe?"

"Way out! Way out! Make way and show the exit!" I bawl it out in my best I'm-the-biggest-bitch-in-the-Blades voice, nevermind the secrecy of my position. Oh, and the idea of anyone not knowing how to leave an island fortress with one obvious and highly exclusive means of egress is a ridiculous notion that did not occur. In any case, I ran over a mousey EEC clerk, who managed to point the way while en route to the floor.

The main door loses a bit of paint as I skewer it open with my spear, and we storm out into the open air. Lower Ebonheart clings to the rock beneath us, with a good drop to the water from this arcing stone bridge. If we run into trouble, can I levitate us both? And to where, besides the breakers on the rocks?

"Keep running," someone screams, and Mehra's voice is unfamiliar at such a pitch. The radiant netch is many cantonlengths nearer now, the details of its terrible howdah structures becoming clearer every second. How many spell-slinging ordinators shelter there, and what manner of eldritch mahout? We felt the flagstones of that bridge as heaps of burning coals, or such was the feeling of the hunters' eyes upon us. It was impossible to know whether we had been spotted, whether the netch's onrush was a headlong pursuit or just the quickening inevitability of our detection. Mehra is limping by the time we reach the sweet, concealing shadow of the gatehouse tower, and sag down to a jerky agitated walk to avoid attracting attention.

"Mehra." Do Dunmer drop the surname when addressing each other on intimate terms? I've never had occasion to notice. "Your feet."

She stops at the bottom of the steps down to the bailey, and leans against the wall to survey her bloodied soles.

"I... suppose I haven't run barefoot across rocks since I was..."

"Let me cut you some wraps. The ground ahead is filthy." I reach for my knife, but it is stuck in a doorframe inside Baar Dau at the moment.

"Leave off, Naleva! It is nothing unless we are taken on account of it. Keep on, or they will crest the walls and see us from above."

Given names it is, then. The blood oozing from between her toes brings on a stinging in my eyes and throat, and let this garrison of Colovian goatbumpers gawk all they like; I'm not letting her limp through this fortress' horseshit and mud. I lunge forward and pluck Mehra from the step, cradling her upright in the crook of my right arm. The singsong intake of breath she makes upon leaving the ground makes my arms tremble despite the insignificance of her weight. Her legs meet my fingers through the robe's worn-out material, and the pursuing netch seems suddenly far away.

In the end, I remember more about the feel of her beneath my fingers than the nail-biting rush through Ebonheart. I set her down on the smooth broad timbers of the Six Fishes, but whatever tender look I had on my fool face evaporates as I see the fear on hers. Is it fear of pursuit, or fear of me, grizzled inexplicable corpuscent freak that I am?

Before I have long to threat or the tavern's patrons can cast their quizzical glances our way, the Temple is upon us. Morning sunlight vanishes from the windows, interdicted by the swooping bulk of our tentacled pursuer. As the netch passes overhead and the gloom of its lee recedes, the horrific inquisitorial trumpet lashes the stone corners of Ebonheart. Never has the Empire's paper suzerainty of Armistice seemed so frail.

Neither has Mehra, her hand clammy as I draw her against the tide of customers who rush at the windows. As we collapse into a secluded table, the exclamations of enraptured patrons relay the netch's

progress as it circles the fortress three times for each of the Triunes, then docks with the tallest turret, no doubt to await the Duke's reception. It is all highly irregular and aggressive, and perfectly communicates the radical nature of the situation. Why, oh why couldn't they have sent a rowboat?

"Do you hear that?" I whisper into her ear. "It's at the castle. That means we have five minutes or so. Let's wait for this place to clear out, and then we'll hightail it to the waterfront."

She nods, ending with her head bent down towards the table, eyes squeezed tight.

"Now tell me fast, Mehra, who is this Hateria and how can a Cyrodil help us?"

"She keeps a fishing boat at the docks, and takes us to Holamayan when needed. Our dissident monastery on Azura's Coast."

The barman has left a clean-looking rag nearby. I snatch it, and rip it in half.

"Mehra. Hand me that sujamma on the next table there, quick."

She looks at me in alarm, but I give her knee an urgent squeeze and kneel on the floor beside her with palm urgently open. My librarian turns thief and hands me the half-full cup of bitter liquor. It will serve to wash away the dirt and reeds and scour the cuts. The harsh liquid seems to hiss as it drips on the floor, and I plant a hand across her thighs as she yelps in pain. I then wrap the pilfered cloth around her feet as tightly and softly as I can. It's the damndest thing, but the sight of her scraped-up soles and red angry toes made me smile with tears in the corners of my eyes. There was an odd feeling in the throat, too, a desire to throw myself across her extremities that were so cruelly offended and just lie on my back there, gazing up at her.

However, the patrons exited the Seven Fishes for a better view, while the barman returned to his post, hands itching for the familiar dishrag. Time to leave.

"Come on, let's go see the Netch!" I dragged Mehra out the door but kept on straight, out beneath the final portcullis and across its wide causeway beyond. Now Ebonheart's chronically cramped waterfront squatted before us, spiking the horizon with masts and slowly crawling with lines of laborers and East Empire Company overseers. Only the Argonian Mission's eloquent disapproval kept hired-out slaves off these teeming, dangerously profitable docks.

"So which boat is it?"

Mehra blanches.

"I... there's so many, and no one I know has actually ever seen it before."

"A Cornerful of Troubles, that is. We'll have to hop on the ferry to Seyda Neen straight away. I don't reckon a single soul there worships any sort of god."

"They'll stop and search the regular passenger traffic, surely. It's blasphemy enough, what we've committed." She seems suddenly to shrink. "Almsi—*Kinsoil and Bone*, what we did we did on the doorstep of my lord Vivec himself, not three hundred paces from..." Her gaze falls heavily on the palace atop its Puzzle Pyramid.

"You mean he actually stays in there? The thought never crossed my mind."

"So far as any of us knows. He hasn't been seen for three birthdays, although the archcanon claims to have spoken with him last year... hey!" She flings out a pale arm, the robe's loose sleeve riding backwards towards her shoulder. "The flag on that mast, with the green fish! I remember it now. Blatta Hateria's vessel."

"A sturgeon," I observe. "A wise fish for a Cyrodil mixed up in sects."

Mehra up and takes off in her foot wrappings like a pauper running for sanctified coins at a saint's procession. The gleaming ebony tail of Ebonheart's dragon skims the top of her hair, which as it turns out, bounces mischievously as she runs. Really, how else are you to get a librarian to run, besides a prison-break? I am able to catch up while appearing to lope incidentally in the same direction. The floating netch pulls into sight from behind the parapet of the lower keep as I cross the plaza. Its tentacles remain still, so perhaps we still have some time before the ordinators bully the Duke into giving the hue and cry. He may lack any ideas not originating with Orvas Dren, but should not find it hard to bend over backwards.

Hateria's ship was happily docked innermost on the pier, a flat-bottomed Dunmer caravel with a mismatched Winterhold rig that sat in the shallows where the ebony-laden galleons could not. Mehra dashed onto the pier, only to be brought up short by the incredulous bloated tuber of a watchman. Thus arrested, she had the sense to clam up, leaving me with a dozen paves to compose myself for the encounter.

"Now there! What can you be thinkin' about, ambling on out there?"

I rap my spear butt against the planks as if summoning a servant.

"Apologies if my charge here was too eager. She ran past you on errand, to inform Blatta Hateria of the urgent business I have with her.

"Not here anyway," grunts our pestilential obstacle, and he shoes Mehra back towards dry land.

"We shall have to await her on board, then."

A preparatory wheeze.

"*Look*. I don't know how you do things in that *hive* of yours," he flicks a meaty hand towards Vivec's docks, "but that's not how it works around here. No one violates dock or vessel security. Come back with Blatta herself, or her officer of the watch."

I sniff at him and spin away on my heel, collecting Mehra with a snap of my fingers. This bastard seems to have mistaken me for native. That's new.

"You lie so well," Mehra observes.

I open my mouth to retort when the netch reappears, a gently swaying bubble on the horizon dawdling around between Baar Dau and High Fane.

"Did the Imperials turn them away?" Her voice can hardly credit the possibility and it makes me smile for a moment.

"Well, Orvas Dren has little use for the Temple. Could be good news."

It is not good news.

As we stand gawking in the naked plaza, a column of hard-marching legionaries rounds the corner in front of the Six Fishes. With them trot a dozen or so Dunmer. Their armor has been removed, perhaps to make them resemble the Duke's henchmen, but how clear it is, in their gait and flapping blue mantles and their very faces.

"Ordinators," Mehra croaks, and takes wing down a greasy, barrel-clogged alley between Company warehouses. Startled or bemused laborers on break trip me up as I struggle after her, counting the faces that can identify us if a thorough search begins.

One of her foot rags has fallen off, but that is all I can catch of her in the sudden gloom where the way takes a turn. I step over a handcart and its cargo of woven bottle-shaped baskets from the mainland.

"There you are, copperhead." Mehra has come up short against a dead end of cold slate. She leans back against the wall with knees bent, a sort of half-sitting pose that bares her legs and has the effects of a cornered animal. Her copper eyes fix mine, and I realize how evasive they have been before now.

"Why did you rescue me?" Boots tromp on the square, and there is defeat on her face.

Do not immediately answer. Sweep forward and grasp her by the shoulders, to return that metallic gaze at close proximity. For a moment, the disbelief that anyone could wish to harm this creature overwhelms you.

"Might I continue to rescue for a little longer?" A shiver rushes up from someplace below. Take that as her answer. "Then hold me, tight as you can."

With that you push upwards on invisible wings, rising between the dark cliffs on either side. The narrow window ledge kisses your forehead; the levitation charm attunes to your will more precisely every day.

"You might have mentioned you could fly," Mehra laughs, suddenly revived. "A nightblade in the Blades, are you?"

“Far from it, as you'll find out the hard way unless we can get this window open in the next few seconds.”

“Bolted,” she reports, reaching up.

“Damn.”

“But I can see the catch. Hold still and I may have the right cantrip.” She waggles upward with sudden agility, planting her feet on my bent knees. For a moment my face is full of robe, and then she is sitting on my shoulders, garment hiked heedlessly up. Ashen thighs press coolly upon my ears, and for a moment I am so taken with the smell of her that I barely notice the murmur of magic and the *clack* of an opened window. By all the variously existing and fabricated gods, what am I going to *do* with this woman?”

She rolls forwards off my shoulders and disappears into the dark. I can feel the levitation charm wavering, but am loth to use another if I can avoid it. Of course I end up with my arms flung over the sill and my boots scrabbling at the wall's flaky lichen. Mehra helps me through, into another dimly lit canyon, but this time the walls are stacks of knee-high crates.

“Glass windows in a warehouse,” I whisper. “Typical Company extravagance. Secure that latch and I'll got make certain we're alone.”

I advance down the wooden trench, inventoried wealth stretching skyward to the dim rafters. Probably no ebony on the lightly-built second floor; more likely I'm surrounded by a fortune in glass. This smell says otherwise, though. As I pad out onto the stair landing, an incredibly pungent, herbal scent descends from the lofted third story. Even on my furtive sally to the locked and barred gloom of the ground floor, it threatens to overwhelm.

“Hackle-lo,” Mehra pronounces as she she meets me at the top of the stairs. “The harsh feeling is saltrice, and that sweetness is marshmerrow.” She smiles at something far off, outside our stone enclosure. Oddly enough, her identifying the smell greatly increases the rate at which it fades and becomes pleasant.

“Let's hide up there, then.” I gesture up the staircase of wide planks, with its ramps and pulleys.

“Oughtn't we to run? There is an opening for winching up cargo, and we could fly down.”

“That would get us caught, I think. You with no shoes, and the whole of Ascadia excels in nothing so much as catching runaways.”

“But they'll search the warehouses!” She moves imperceptibly away from the front door, that heartbreaking hunted look again. I mount the stairs, and stop to lean over the bannister towards her. Very quietly and evenly in her ear:

“If they want to come in that door, they will buy it so dear that no one will think twice about you afterwards; I promise you that. I will stand before you however long you desire, and wreak such ruin that the Emperor himself will want to see me judged. And even then I shall only bow my head or unbind my tongue if you are there with me, far away from this cruel place. Do you take me at my word?”

Well, so that went on for longer than expected, and my voice sort of quivered towards the end. Turned all breathy. Her head turns slowly to meet mine, not drawing back, eyes wide and unguarded and seeming to realize something.

“And besides,” I continue, doing my best to affect an affable tone. “The Company would never let its hoards be thoroughly searched without a major scandal. The Empire may be willing to compromise suzerainty and principles in the name of stability, but its wealth is sacrosanct.”

Mehra decides to smile, and as she follows me upstairs, she half succeeds. This warehouse must be a towering structure when viewed from outside, because the ceiling up here is the highest yet. I suppose you just don't notice the more prosaic buildings when there are soaring citadels and ebony dragons and floating moon turds everywhere.

My librarian climbs up beside me and surveys the soaring peaks of the sackcloth mountain range that surrounds us. The landing holds a tiny desk with lantern and ledger, but absent that there

remains not a single yard of floor space not buried fathoms deep in bulging cargo. It all stretches away into the hazelike gloom as a vast rising slope, towards a glinting slit window at the cavern's very apex.

"This is mostly saltrice," Mehra observes. "Let's go hide up there with the hackle-lo." And she makes a sudden bound for the nearest bulging canvas boulder, her feet barely denting the stiffened surface before she has attained a scrambling height of a dozen feet. I follow with something like a giggle, tearing at the immensely heavy ledges and handholds with abandon. We reach the summit at roughly the same time, panting with the realization of how *hot* it is in here. The pungent air fills the nostrils like cotton, clinging to your sides beneath the arms and shoulder blades. Used to the stuffy depths of Vivec cantons, Naleva seems less winded than I.

"Look, we can cover ourselves in there if they come in." She points at an abrupt depression in the sacks where the glacier of rice has left a space between support beams. I leap down and toss about a few hundredweight of produce to create a concealable nest. "That's perfect," Mehra reports, visibly trying to disregard my unnerving strength. "They'd never notice that. I wouldn't let you sell your life for me in any case."

I look up at her warmly, but the sweat just runs into my eyes.

"It's even hotter down here, though. Have a seat on the edge there. You must be thirsty."

When I ascend, she has piled several smaller bags around her and kneels among them, eyes shut.

"Heavenly, Naleva, just heavenly. Smell the hackle-lo." That's the stuff alright, and aggressively so, in those quantities. "I haven't had any all year, do you know?"

"Why not?"

"The High Fane regimen has become stricter ever since the Armigers left for Molag Mar and the Indorils took all the Vvardenfell posts. It's looked down upon. No one ever follows the strictures flawlessly, but in my position... any reprimand or penance would have brought a dangerous amount of scrutiny." She drains the rest of my canteen at my urging.

"And what brought the dangerous scrutiny since we last met?"

Copper glints briefly, then sinks to the ground.

"Let's not discuss that." A pause. "I have decided to tell myself it was inevitable."

She stands and glides over to the window, robe whispering. The sill sits just above her head, and I hold a sack in place for her to stand on.

"I do not see any of the ordinators, Naleva. Just a few legionaries watching the gates and docks, turning out the ships' crews. That awful fat watchman is hounding them every step of the way."

"Then Mephala smiles upon her web. Any activity on Hateria's barky?"

"Yes, the pennant with the green fish has been pulled down. No signs of any crew, however."

"And you have no idea how to find her? And there is no one else who knows the way to Holamayan?"

"No one else. We usually make meeting arrangements by Aesopian letter through the Duke's Temple liason, but the castle is off-limits now." She lowers herself from the window and her loose robe slips back. The lashes glare at me, wreathed in mortified skin. "I have only met the woman once, on my first visit to the sanctuary."

"Did they treat your wounds, after they beat you?" I ask very softly.

"Oh." She shrinks deeper into her robe, and stoops to fish some hackle-lo out of a splitting sack. "They never touched me. After a while, they talk to you and talk to you and then they watch you whip yourself. It can't be explained."

"How long?" It is to her turned back that I direct the question.

"...was I in there? I have no firm idea. Perhaps as little as three days, if my mind deceived me greatly."

"We are all greatly deceived, Mehra. All the Dunmer. I know a tenth of what you must know and I can feel that. In that moon by the temple and the palace... are the Three really... gods?"

"They are gods." Head turned, and I can still see the sadness. "They are our gods and they love us. I hope one day our faith can make them see."

"See what? I can only see your back."

She turns.

"To see that we must have truth, and the people's love will heal the gods' lies. Come sit by me, Amaya."

I did as she bade me, smiling at the name, and we huddled together atop our mountain of cereals and herbs. My shirt hung heavy with sweat and Mehra's robe was damp, slipping around over her wet smoky flesh. All the same, her shoulder was cool against mine where she had rolled the sleeves up. The sharp green vivacity of the hackle-lo wafted around us from the sack, building into a soothing balm in the air. It pricked the skin on my shoulders as if my sticky garment did not cling so. It cleared the breath as it entered my throat and lungs, and above all banished the heavy pall of gods and liars. Body and mind, revived.

"Just breathe, see?"

I lay back to sigh with satisfaction, and Mehra popped a cluster of the spiny green leaves into my open mouth.

"But they are raw!"

"So much the better. As the ancient Velothi plucked them from the Grazelands trees before ever they were traded away, as the ashlanders still do."

"I have been among them since we last met, you know."

"Who, the Ashlanders?"

"The Urshilaku, in the northern wastes between Khuul and Sheogorad."

"Such places you have been to! But whatever for?"

I chuckle at her tone.

"We shall have to cure you of that metropolis snobbery of your, Mehra Milo." Despite myself, I squeeze her arm above the elbow. "I shed mine not long after coming here. And why do you think I happened on your note to Amaya? The wisewoman said that the dissident priests harbored prophecies long thought lost."

"Then Holomayan is the destination for you. You'll come with me there? Not back to Caius?"

"Of course. Caius is recalled to the capital in any case. I'm the new Caius."

"Oh. Good."

I don't like the wistfulness Caius' name brings out in her, but then again she seems pleased at the latter pronouncement. For a moment, pregnant silence.

"It really is hot, isn't it." For some illogical reason we both implicitly understand, she laughs by way of agreement. *Hotter than a Mir Corrup midsummer, but it's not enough, without the heat of you. That's what I want, all of it.* I twist around her in a slow partial orbit.

"I can find us Blatta Hatteria," Mehra announces, seemingly jolted by my gaze.

"How?" It comes out sounding more disappointed than anything else. I had felt something decisive coming on.

"The most direct way: I'll ask. Her presence here by itself is perfectly legal, and she will recognize me. Any other way and the precautions we have arranged will make it impossible to discuss matters. She is extremely conscientious in our dealings."

"Otherwise I could go instead? This sort of thing is very much in my line, these days."

"But you cannot. I... shall do it." She seems to have arrived at a conclusion that has been building over the past twenty minutes. Now the thing is said, and the declaration was more difficult than the fearsome deed itself. So resolved, she appears to relax.

"I think I hate this plan, Mehra."

"Yet you must stay here. Amaya can be the one who waits this time."

I try to give her a conceding kiss on the cheek, but it turns hungry midway. I draw back and

cover my breathlessness by removing the dagger from its mount on my staff.

"Take this with you when you go. Feel it first." She stretches her ink-stained fingers out slowly, and I wish that they would reach past the imbued weapon and... "Do you feel what it can do?"

"I... think so."

"It fires on contact, lasts twenty seconds or so, with around half a dozen charges total. Just tap anyone who hassles you. And the dagger as well. You're acquainted with it already."

She picks up on my growing agitation.

"Naleva, do not torment yourself alone in here. This is the best way. If you were to be taken, I would be lost, but you can bring the Blades to help me, even in an Ebonheart cell."

I make no protest. Let her carry that false confidence with her on her task. It may tell more than any aids or obstacles.

"Well in any case, you can't go out dressed like that. They'll know a Temple robe when they see it."

"A disguise, then? Something around the warehouse?"

It would be greatly dishonest to leave out the surge of lecherous joy I felt just then.

"Better just to swap clothes." I try so hard not to look guilty.

She looked at me for a moment with the sort of blank expression that can neither convey nor hide anything.

"Alright."

And all mounting lust aside, it was an enormous mercy to shed the swampy rags that swaddled me. I ripped my shirt over my head and let the free air flow over my breasts as they fell. A glance down and yes, my nipple was still gone. The scar was smaller, though, a mere diagonal streak no longer than six or seven inches. Looking back at Mehra chased her eyes away. I have seen that look on a woman's face before, however, and it is not disgust. She would expect me to carry scars, would she not? Half standing, the trousers have become an intractable concrete mass instead of cloth, and I haul them down with main force, smallclothes too. I squat atop that saltrice ridgeline, naked and gleaming and *gods* her eyes upon me are electric. All the more delicious for their shyness.

Mehra makes a slight swaying motion, as if about to go change in private. But the robe comes down.

Oh, what is the point in describing that half-second? A flicker of shadowed glories and then she is holding the drape of course fabric out to me.

"Not really looking to sweat any more, thanks." I sink down to a cross-legged position, hoping that contact with the rough sackcloth will put out the fire between my legs.

A forlorn hope, as Mehra pulls my traveling pants over the inky sheen of her thighs, raises two ebony-tipped pyramids beneath the damp shirt. Suddenly ashamed of my gaze, I hand over the staff and dagger, then busy myself folding her robe.

"Just tuck that into the belt; I didn't bring along the scabbard. If you take a smaller sack with you, you'll look like any other traveler."

"Fair enough. I'll fly down."

Her bravery just then matched my fear for her. I reserved none for myself, having become convinced that I could fight off the entire garrison if need be. I wish I could tell you about a tense and tender parting that took place then, when Mehra's devastating recapture could have been imminent. However, my wolfishness and lust made all such parting gestures seem impossible. We descended the stairs in silences, a full three feet and a sense of wistful pessimism strung out between us. Standing by the window in birthday suit as she climbed down, I felt oafish and ridiculous. Then she floated to the ground, I closed the latch, and Mehra was gone.